Anomaly

Literary Journal

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CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND FICTION

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Anomaly Literary Journal: Issue 6 is pretty well stocked. We have more poets in this issue than any previous issue and more artwork than any other issue we've released. This is due to just having so much beautiful work to choose from that we couldn't say no.

With this issue we welcome the utterly wonderful Sherrel McLafferty to the *Anomaly Lit* staff. Sherrel is an Associate Editor at *FLAPPERHOUSE* and a reader at *The Tishman Review*. Her work has been published in *Flyover Country Review, Black Denim Lit, and Bartleby Snopes* & *Prairie Margins.* Sherrel has contributed brilliantly to this issue and we are beyond grateful to have her join us.

We open this issue with Maggie Smith's poem '*Having Children Is Like Dropping Acid*'. Smith's ability to take the ordinary and translate it into the extraordinary is next to none– raising children, for example. Routinely, even just as an uncle, I've found myself doing things that, in any other context would rightly make anyone watching assume I was off my face on crack (walking down Grafton Street eating an ice–cream whilst pretending to be a monkey is one that stands out immediately). It is this gift with language and imagery, with storytelling, that has rightly awarded Smith her status as one of the most beloved and lauded poets in contemporary literature.

Following Smith, Jack Warren is back in our pages and brings us his poem '*Bombweed*'. In a mere fourteen lines Warren manages to simultaneously place us in the moment, reflect on his own peoples' history and interrupts the thought process by slamming us back into the moment again.

There is a touch of home-sickness in this that perhaps a lesser poet might have felt the need to expand upon but Warren hesitates, he holds back and in doing so delivers just *enough* of a punch that you, for a few seconds, feel the weight of its emotion before the real world sucks him back into the present moment and the thought and feeling evaporates as quickly as it arose. It is not over-done and not under-delivered but this technique is a very fine line and not something every poet can successfully pull off. There is a reason Warren has been chosen as one of the '*The Best New British and Irish Writers*' for this year's anthology from Eyewear Publishing and this, I think, is a great example of why.

These poems are in turn followed by a host of wonderful poets ranging from Kate Sweeney, Trish Mishkin, Simon Shieh, Bruce McRae, Octavio Gonzalez and Christos Kalli- another up and coming poet to watch out for.

Gina Bernard brings us a stunner of a poem in '*hate the sin*' that addresses not only self-attitude but the attitudes of others towards the LGBTQ community but on a deep, personal level. Christopher Locke and Bruce McRae offer up stunning work, as does Sandy Coomer.

Sandy's first poem '*Losing a Son*' is heartbreaking, astounding and says only what it needs to say. About this poem, in particular, Sherrel said it made her 'angry I didn't write it.' For me, though I love both that poem and '*The Minotaur's Last Interview*' (which frankly made me mad I didn't write it) but her poem '*Running*' broke me. It was so impactful in its brevity. As I read, my eyes followed the lines and ran with the runners in the poem. This is something that to me, as an Irish person, is such a foreign concept. We hear it on the news but we don't hear about all of these school shootings and it is not something I can wrap my head around. The poem is short, it's concise. It opens in the middle of the action and relentlessly drags you along with the action until it is over '*All those children running across the parking lot./They will run every nightmare into the street.*' It is shocking and heartbreaking and doesn't let you go until it's finished.

The fiction and non-fiction in this issue are all different and in some ways similar. These are

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characters in various personal dilemmas, some major, some minor but all of them grab you. Bailey Merlin's short story '*Backstamp*' finds the protagonist Anna failing to deal with grief until she finally gives in, faces it and begins to move beyond it. Lillian King's '*Black Hill Mountains*' brings us a couple of hours- if even that- in the life of a young gay man trying to pick out a birthday present for his boyfriend and meeting out and out homophobia from an antiques dealer's husband. The main character doesn't at any point feel overtly threatened but is, you could say, quietly bothered. You can sense the frustration and unwillingness to lean towards out-right confrontation which I think is easily relatable to anyone of the LGBTQ community.

Andrea McLoughlin's *'Nobody Likes A Blue Girl'* is riveting, upsetting and vital. There's good reason this was shortlisted for both *Glimmer Train's New Writer Award* and the *Raymond Carver Prize*. Evan Caris brings us a short story that deals with something we haven't often seen: a struggling single mother desperately trying to find a job and despairing. I've read short stories about murder, about multiple murder, about strippers and gold-hearted hookers but just an ordinary woman desperate for any job that will pay her so she can feed her kid in a way that doesn't dehumanise her? Those stories don't often get written.

Nate Ferguson's '*Chalk Talk*' was one of those submissions that from pretty much the second paragraph I was already excited and thinking '*This is going to be good!*' and by the end I was practically already writing the acceptance letter.

Honestly, I could write about each and every piece in this issue but I'm going to stop myself. There will be a podcast- maybe even with the lovely Sherrel- and some other treats too, so I'm going to leave it at this and let you all enjoy the issue we have put together. *Anomaly Literary Journal: Issue 6* is our third anniversary issue and we are immensely proud to present it to you.

We have had such an outstanding amount of artists participate in this issue that we were over-flowing with choices for the magazine this time around. We have to give our huge love and appreciation to all these artists: Seung-Hwan Oh, Joseph Zbukvic, David Antonides, Michael Creese, Ruslan Fedasyuk, Richard Vyse and Jim Zola– you have honestly made this issue of *Anomaly Lit* as beautiful as it could possibly have been. We adore your willingness to work with us!

Don't forget to watch out for the podcast in the next few weeks, which will be available on our website, Soundcloud and on iTunes! We will be joined at the end of the podcast with the new single by the gorgeously talented Aislin Evans, who brings us her new single '*Feel About You*'.

Thank you to each and every writer and artist for contributing to this issue of *Anomaly Lit* and to our readers who encourage us to keep this going. You can also purchase a print copy of *Anomaly Lit* off ISSUU, at Https://ISSUU.com/ and search for *Anomaly Literary Journal*. We don't make any money off this, as we're non-profit but you can read a copy of your very own, in print, as we intend it to be. We recommend a small sized format in a full colour, matte finish. It's not cheap but it is beautiful.

All that being said, welcome to *Anomaly Literary Journal: Issue 6*. Read, share and enjoy!

All our very best,

The Anomaly Lit Team

Lorcán Black, Oliver Tatler, Roseanna Free & Sherrel McLafferty

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Having Children Is Like Dropping Acid

in a hundred and one ways, like, for example,
you suddenly have new words for things,

alligator for *elevator* or a pirate's *tickle me shimbers*,
and every word is on the tip of your tongue—

there, right there—and you hear music more
acutely, like once I swear I heard part

of a Bowie song I'd never heard before,
new instrumentation, but no, it was the same

version I'd played hundreds of times,
and talk about an out-of-body experience,

an other-plane experience, how you realize
the minute you're born, you start dying,

and the same goes for the minute you pick
a flower, and you tell your kids this

when they bring in wild violets from the yard,
and it makes them sad, it changes them,

and everything is more beautiful and more
terrible, and the colors are so alive, they sing—

you wouldn't believe the vibrato of green—
and each band trembling in the spectrum

has its own smell and texture, and they hurt you,
I mean it hurts you just to look at them.

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Bombweed

For AJ Barker

On the third morning of rough sleep
in the plum markets of Ljubljana
I notice a byway between the music hall
and the butchers. Herb willow colonising
the trampled shadows. I think of 'Bombweed',
the flowers given name in 40's London
as it flourished in the crater wounds
of blitzed tenements, or wound it's way
through the rubble of burning munitions plants.
I wonder at the symbols we choose in adversity.
The things we decide give us strength
as AJ returns, bouncing like a Jackson Slugger
a brown bag of fruit bulging under his arm
and each one as thick and round as bombs.

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Why My Grandmother Reminds Me of Sylvia Plath

It's more than just the head in the oven,
how she first sent my mother and my barely-toddling uncle
to play in the gravel-bottomed playground
across the street, where they rocked
the rusty swing-chains until the landlady spotted them
on her way to the mailbox
and got the key.

It's the one handsome drunk she married
who could never stop her
from fucking every other one she could find.
Men who came for the open-toed shoes
but stayed for the bayberry candles,
superstitions, and real maple syrup—
then slunk off to continue rotting somewhere,
like damp fall tucked under the arbors.

It's how my mother swatted the back of my legs
with the wooden hairbrush
when I wouldn't stand still for pigtails, then cried
herself forgiven on the edge of the tub. *I said I'd never,*
I always said I'd never…

It's the photograph of my grandmother leaning
into my mother's crib, how one hand braces her baby's back
while the other hand curls into a hook just below her baby's chin,
maybe to gut her,
maybe to hook her and never toss her back

and how I mimic this movement
when I scratch the itch of indecision
or lust, and how the blood holds its breath
as it dives down under my wedding ring and squeezes
from palm to fingertip, brushing the knuckle bone,
tickling an intimacy I never knew I lacked.

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At the Obstetrician's Office

—for my son

We discuss options for your circumcision.
The plastibell which doesn't ring
or the traditional method, blood droplets
on tiny squares of gauze.
Both pull the skin back and coax the pink nub
into the world to be called to council
in future matters of the head and heart.
Outside your nursery, a bird of paradise
begins to cartwheel out of its bract.
Soon it will stand, overdressed and alone,
at the helm of its canoe, cloudy sap
dripping from starboard. The hours dilate.
Behind the doctor's head, O'Keeffe's *Red Poppy*:
the petals season the air with iron
while the center's dark eye awaits a decision.

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Festival

Break the fast with figs
and dates at sundown.

Set rows of oil lamps
on the new moon night.

Join a fertility rite
where everyone wears a mask.

~

At our wedding, I circle you seven times.
A plain gold band. Seven blessings.
You are beaming.

Our son calls from college, asks us to sing
the ancient words with him. Before we finish,
he is crying.

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red line, chicago

i. leaving

I leave the theater with something in my chest like a bullet. Step onto the sidewalk with the feeling of it hot in my heart, watch the curb swarming with taxis and the marquee flickering gold. Once before, I staggered outdoors from a man's bleak room and it was the same kind of stupor — entering a building in the light of day and stumbling out into darkness, finding myself in a body that was different from the one I had known. I walk to the subway in a throng of strangers. I look down and see old wounds.

ii. returning

I return from the theater on the latest train, sit on the edge of my seat to avoid the newspapers and cigarettes and spilled rancid milk. I will never make this journey again but I will return to it over and over — I will live perpetually in the recurrence of a handful of nights. The strains of a song from an underground busker and the lights will blacken the stage; the slam of a door swinging shut in the night and a man's hands will close round my throat. I look at the strangers around me and I empty all our pockets. I paper the walls with ticket stubs from a thousand journeys to nowhere.

iii. morning

In the morning I wait for a train to the airport, lean against my suitcase and drink from a paper cup. A man approaches with a bouquet of roses and presses it into my hands, says *Every year I find a woman that looks like her.* I understand then that the heart bears weight that would break the body, that it takes the shape of the stories it can never stop telling. I carry the flowers across the city. I leave them on a bench in O'Hare.

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after seven days you turn into myth

Sometimes it's helpful to think of you with other men.
And tragedy. Say another man asks to finish your spare ribs.
Say he strips them down to the bone, then he eats
the bone—snap shell and marrow.
I'm just sitting there, mouth open, bones
scattered around my plate, holding your hand
under the table, trying not to scream as your fingernails
dig crescent moons into my skin.

//

The tragedy is that I remember you perfectly,
that the shadow lining my jaw is the memory
of your hand at night, when I needed you,
when I was hungrier than a sunflower in full
bloom in winter, when the night light turned our lovemaking
into an oil painting that hung on our wall for years and never
ever dried.

//

It's the second time I've wanted you today.
I left the tea leaves to soak overnight;
they tell me your fortune, or mine, it's
not clear. When I think of you, strange
things happen. My ancestors send
a horse to my apartment and it takes me
to the tip of an island, leaves me there
with a forest of silent palm trees.
At the height of my longing, a coconut
will drop to the ground and split open.
It will sound just like your name.
For one day and one night, it will nourish me.

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גד קינר-קיסינגר

במגרות אמי

בְּמֶגֵרוֹת אִמִּי

מָצָאתִי תַצְלוּמֵי אוִיר

שֶׁמִּפּוּ

אֶת נַפְשִׁי.

מֵרַחוֹק.

מִלְמַעְלָה.

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In My Mother's Drawer

Translated by Natalie Feinstein

In My Mother's Drawer

I found aerial photos

That mapped me

Out

From afar.

From above.

Un-Touching.

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Magical Thinking

Moving to the beat, our tango just began:
my own private Idaho bronco ride
under Mormon–white cotton sheets which soon
reddened and bloomed. Sprung loose like a baby's
tooth (in Spanish we say milky), twisting
it back and forth, side to side, because it
hurts so good. Because it's time, you say, but
you didn't say. You come out swinging, lip
syncing while I dance in a darkened hall
only to ride shotgun at dawn. Green sweat
cooling your brow, bitter blaze of my coal
scuttle–blond eyes, charcoal tongue and bulging
Adam's apple lodged in your throat. My lips
blacken with loss, coals burning like fireflies

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Fiction: Part I

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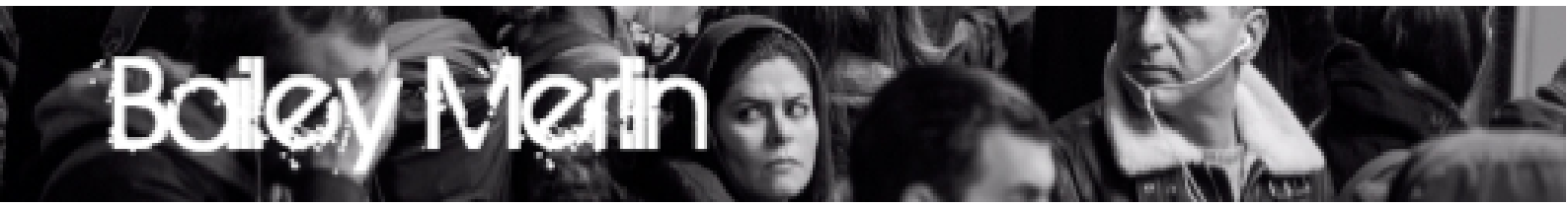

Backstamp

It was the sort of room you went to when your life fell apart. Its windows peeked out onto the dimly lit Portland skyline and everything was still and everything settled. In the midsts of my own personal teardown, I set my bags on the reading chair my aunt bought me after offering me a place to stay. Neither one of us knew for how long. We, the bags and myself, took a deep breath, held it for a while, and then let it go. It wasn't enough to give us any peace, but it was a step in the right direction.

After the cremation in Cheyenne, a necessity after finding out how much it would have cost to ship their caskets back to Tennessee, I brought them to Portland. It was the only place that seemed fitting to let them go. It was meant to be a short trip, just a matter of scattering the ashes, but I found that unscrewing the tops of those urns was easier said than done. In those first few days, I sat in the hotel in Cheyenne and cried until housekeeping showed up and tried to clean my room, thinking I'd gone. Upon finding out about the tragic incident, they graciously let me stay a few extra nights. They also charged me premium prices, but I wouldn't find that out until I checked my bank statement three months later.

Eventually I boarded a plane to PDX, but only after fighting with the TSA over the urns, which led to a public meltdown. Apparently ceramic urns can't go through security because they show up opaque on the scanner. Luckily, most urns these days come in two parts: a harder ceramic shell and the other a plastic container, something no one would think of until a woman my mother's age made the suggestion from her spot in line. She would later find me and my bags next to a Panda Express and offer me a tissue.

I bought two seats next to each other at the back of the plane, hoping that I would be left alone in the throbbing grief that came and went as consistently as a heartbeat. I didn't take into account the fact that the restroom was at the back. Anytime someone had the urge to pee, they got a glimpse of abject mourning.

It was hard to find things to be grateful for, but my aunt meeting me at the gate was one of them. We didn't say anything to one another in traffic, allowing me time to look at the postcards they had sent to me at school during their trip from Chattanooga to, they had hoped, Portland. When my dad told me they were going after he lost his job, I had been devastated. I wasn't happy for him as he had expected. Not at all. How many miles away was Portland? That was a whole different ocean. Not only that, but it meant that my brothers, my too-young-for-permanent-memories brothers, were going to be taken from me. I was certain that by the time they saw me again, they would have no idea who I was.

In a way, I was right.

"Do you want some coffee?" she asked me as we neared her townhouse. "There's this place on Chapel."

"I'm okay, thanks."

We ignored the reflexive lie. For the rest of the week she ignored me, the ghost in her house. When I woke up, I would listen to her get ready for work, and would emerge sometime later to eat her cruelty-free, hormone-free, fat-free, trans fat-free, gluten-free kale and tofu microwavable snack packs because they had the only label in the fridge I could read without rolling my eyes. They were awful, but my aunt kept buying them for me because they were the first things to go.

In the afternoons, I sat on her little patio that had just enough grass around it to be considered a lawn.

It was better than getting bedsores on a mattress that had surely been selected to discourage visitors from overstaying their welcome. For a few hours, especially on sunny days, I would sit on the patio and look at the postcards again and again, fanning them out: Chattanooga, Gettysburg, D.C., Cleveland, Indianapolis, and the final one from Cheyenne. Each one of them was no longer than a few sentences, but together they told an earnest story of hopes for the future.

My mother's handwriting crossed the paper states, sometimes my father's, but always signed by everyone. When I looked at them, they were still travelling. When I looked at them, I was still righteously angry at them for leaving in the first place. The second I set them aside they disappeared back into their

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urns.

During my second week, my aunt came home to me stacking and unstacking her little cairns that she kept on the patio table. “Hey, Anna. You okay?” she asked, setting her purse on the kitchen counter.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Sure don’t look it.” She opened the refrigerator door. “Want a beer?”

It was a question she asked me every night, one that I declined because I hadn’t worked up the spirit to do anything other than eat food I hated, sleep, and be miserable. Tonight, something shifted. I fanned the postcards out again. “Yeah, that’d be nice.”

Through the glass door I watched her hand falter on the neck of a bottle before going to grab another.

She joined me and we watched the sun start to go down over the rooftops. “So, when do you think you’ll...y’know?”

I felt ashamed for staying so long. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no,” she said. “It’s not like that. I just...I mean, it’s been a couple of weeks and I just, I just want you to start the healing process as soon as you can.”

“Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?” She reached out and patted my hand. “You don’t need to apologize. You take all the time you need. I’m sorry I said anything.” She went upstairs shortly after, leaving me to sit outside alone. I listened as she turned on the shower, the rumble of the pipes enough to put me to sleep.

The next morning, the rain on my face woke me. Soon after, my aunt came scolding: “Were you out here all night? You’ll get sick like that.”

I promised not to do it again and wished her well off to work. With her gone, it was quiet. For the first time in weeks, my mind began to move, sluggish though it was. I climbed the stairs back up to my room to find them. I set them each on the desk, all four of them with two so much larger than the others. It seemed wrong that they be separated like that.

So, hugging them all to my chest, we went downstairs again where I put them on the counter like so many cups of coffee. With that, I began to tear through my aunt’s cabinets. There was a pressure cooker, a mixing bowl, some Tupperware, but none of it was big enough. Out in the garage, I started to scrounge through the shelves and found a giant boil pot from her days of living on the Gulf Coast.

Back through the house, I was on the patio lining them up one by one. They would have wanted to be together. With great reverence, I unscrewed their tops and poured them into the pot. Bits of them flew away in the breeze, but I didn’t begrudge them that freedom. It must have been hard being locked up.

I smiled down at them before I put the lid on top. And just like that, I felt the need to shower, get dressed, and plot a route to the Burnside Bridge. I carried them to the nearest TriMet MAX station where I bought a ticket and waited for a while. Once inside, I sat with the pot in between my legs, counting exits. No one looked at me funny.

Walking down the street, I pointed the sights out to them, commented on outfits, and laughed outright at things I knew they would have enjoyed. Instead of going to the bridge, though, I walked along the river. It turned out to be such a beautiful day. Halfway between bridges, I found a set of stairs that led down to the water.

The pot handles had formed small blisters along the insides of my palms, but I didn’t care. I lifted the top and looked down at them again. “We made it,” I said. “We finally made it.”

We sat together for a time, side by side, watching kayakers and boats go by in the breeze. “I’m sorry,” I told them. “I’m sorry this isn’t more. I didn’t know what to do. I just loved you so much. I wanted you to be happy.”

I wanted something to happen, some affirmation that they were out there somewhere. I got nothing in return. Not even a breeze to be mistaken for a sign. It was like the world had gone still. My fingers trembled on one of the handles as I began to tip the pot towards the water. They came a little at first, wisps of them flying upwards like they were testing the air, but then they spilled and glubbed into the water.

They poured and poured until they had escaped completely. I watched them fly and float away, together. I watched them for an hour.

When I got up to go, I left the pot on the step.

On the way back to my aunt’s, I stopped into the Powell’s bookstore, the one place my father had promised to take me. It was immense and full of people. I felt overwhelmed, but made myself move close to elbows to acclimate to other human beings. “You can do this,” I whispered and gripped my

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knuckles white. I hadn't been with that many strangers since the funeral. Stepping down into the main room, I looked for something to satisfy my fleeting need for something, anything.

Almost naturally, I found the postcards. Most of them were emblazoned with work done by local artists. But no matter how artsy a town is, there is always the callback to the hokey city postcards that say things like: "Greetings from Somewhere" and "This is Your Souvenir."

I eventually picked that just said: "Portland, Oregon." I paid the cashier a dollar and walked away before she gave me my change. Outside, I asked the guy who wrote people poems on a typewriter if I could borrow a pen. When he gave it to me, I knelt on the grey, gum-encrusted sidewalk and wrote: *Dear everybody, it was nice to hear from you. I miss you. Send me a postcard from wherever you wind up next. Love, Anna.*

I put it in a mailbox without a stamp then tried to find my way back home.

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Black Hill Mountains

The air around Jet is thick with incense, and he feels like he might sneeze on something worth more than he is—and he's worth about three or four hundred dollars on a good night. He lets his fingers trail over a dusty table and the contents piled on top of it, which range from books with no bindings to brass candlesticks with no polish.

The antique shop is stifling. Jet is there to buy a gift for a man he doesn't entirely understand. The man he loves considers himself a bull in a china house when it comes to these cramped, dimly lit stores, but he breathes for antiques, and Jet has come to breathe for him. At the very least, Leon just happens to be the kind of guy Jet likes to be around. The kind of guy worth shopping for.

Jet tries to think like a Ukrainian immigrant with a fondness for warm drinks and old railroad tracks as he moves through the store. Jet has seen him buy half a dozen cameo necklaces, but those were for his sisters, and Jet does not want to get Leon something he will give to his sisters.

Jet spots something different in the mass of cluttered eighteenth century furniture and disheveled heirlooms. He moves towards a cabinet, covering his mouth in case he sneezes.

Inside the clean, well-made cabinet is an array of dolls and objects, all of them with one theme: Native Americans. They all look similar, with exaggerated features and outfits consisting of fringes and beads, their long black hair often topped with elaborate headdresses. At their moccasined feet are a variety of obsidian arrowheads and polished stones.

Jet catches sight of a carving made out of red-tinged wood. The inside is indistinct, rubbed away by years of oiled fingers dragging over its surface. If Jet squints, he can see it being a bird, worn wings streaked with fire. Jet smiles at that.

Red is Leon's favorite color. He tells this to Jet in broken English when he strokes Jet's hair, clumsy fingers ruining his perfect hairstyles, something Jet never notices until later.

Without realizing it, he is breathing on the glass. He steps back, ignoring the marks he has made. He knows what he wants to buy Leon.

He begins a hunt for someone who works there. He nearly knocks over a stack of books, some in a language that looks like Russian, some of them old classics Jet has never read. Jet's mostly just glad he didn't knock them over. He's too small to part the Red Sea, so he ducks and waves through the stacks, a dart frog of a man. His exes would say he's just as poisonous.

He turns a corner. That's when he sees the woman, sitting in an old rocking chair. She's moving back and forth, a steady rhythm his eyes are drawn to. Her gray hair is arranged on either side on her neck, long enough to reach her stomach. Jet thinks she is attractive, but Jet thinks almost everyone is attractive. She looks familiar, but he isn't sure why.

"I want to buy something," he says.

She examines him, sharp eyes critical. "You're not holding anything."

"It's a carving from your cabinet."

"Those aren't for sale."

Jet isn't sure what to say next. He looks around at the little niche she has carved out of this store for herself. There is a woven carpet at her feet and a loveseat next to her rocking chair. More noticeable are the animals. A bird in a cage squawks, fluffing its colorful feathers behind it as it struts along the open door of

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its cage. Jet doesn't really know anything about birds.

Jet knows a little more about cats. He knows the sound they make when he pulls on its tail, and he knows how a cat's claws feel when they carve rivulets down his cheeks. He knows how much fur ends up in his mouth when one is hurled across the room at him. Jet offers a cautious hand to the orange kitten resting on a hundred-year-old end table. The kitten sniffs at him, then starts gnawing at his knuckles with sharp little teeth.

There's a covered cage in the corner. Jet can hear chirping coming from it, the kind of birdsong he hears in the morning when his new, legitimate job as a hotel housekeeper forces him up at an ungodly hour. It sounds nice at the right time of day.

The parrot squawks again. The kitten continues biting Jet's hand.

"The items in my cabinet are my personal property. I'm a collector. They're not for sale."

"Oh, so you just collect Indian dolls? Did you take the arrowheads from burial sites?" asks Jet, tucking a strand of orange hair behind his ear with the hand that isn't being accosted by a small animal.

Her eyes widen, a moment of vulnerability appearing on her features, one that disappears as soon as Jet registers it. Jet nearly feels bad as her mask falls back in place, as quickly as his own would in her position.

"I didn't steal them."

"Oh, so you just bought them from people who did?"

"No!" Her one-word reply is strong, but she doesn't budge in her chair. "No, I didn't. If you're just here to mock my culture, get out. We don't need your business."

He believes it, but it doesn't stop him from letting out a bark of a laugh. He's prevented from replying further by a commotion from another room, his attention drawn to the door where it's crammed next to her loveseat. Jet can hear a man's voice swearing as something bangs against a tile floor. A door slams. The woman ignores it. Jet shakes the kitten off his finger, and it meows pitifully.

"It was taken from its mother too soon," says the woman.

"It's not the only one," says Jet absentmindedly, leaning to see what he can of the racket in the other room. It turns out to be pointless, as the man who caused it comes through the door.

He's an old man, so worn he is whittled away at the edges, exposing harsh cheekbones and brittle blue eyes.

"Why've you got a queer in the shop?"

Jet's jaw clenches slightly. He is suddenly hyper-aware of everything about himself. Of his hair, which is pulled tight behind his ears in a ballerina's bun. In his eyes, which are framed by thick eyelashes, painted thicker. In the way he is dressed, with his shoulders bare and a pair of red shorts clinging to his bottom. He thinks there must be something in the way he holds himself, too. One of his exes used to tell him that he stands like he's asking to give a blowjob, before Jet dumped him for his boss.

The woman's head snaps up. She glares at the man with robin's egg eyes and says, "Ed, get out of here."

"This is my antique store, you know," says Ed to the space to the left of Jet, as though looking right at Jet will threaten his masculinity. "Ruby here just sits on her fat ass and pretends to run it."

The kitten has run away. Jet spots it as it wriggles behind the loveseat, fat orange butt squeezing in unnoticed by all but him.

"I can tell you were a catch," says Jet. "Back before you were bald and dentured."

Jet thinks he sees a smile on Ruby's face, but it's quickly obscured.

"Shouldn't matter to you whether or not I was attractive."

"I'd charge you double just based on your looks, let alone your personality," says Jet smoothly.

Ed laughs, but he doesn't seem amused. It's that kind of laugh men perform when they have a good hand

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in poker, or they know something the man who's cheating with his wife doesn't. Jet finds himself wiping his palms on his shorts as Ed takes a step forward. "So what brings you in here, *sweetheart?*" His words are biting by the time he gets to those two syllables.

"I want to buy something for my boyfriend," he says, the last word said with only the slightest hesitation.

Ed snorts. "Find anything?"

"Yeah," says Jet. "But she won't let me buy it." Ruby's expression shifts. Her mouth tightens; her eyes shut briefly. Jet has been in that kind of situation before. Jet can guess how Ed treats her when they're alone.

Ed turns on her. "You'd turn away a paying customer?" he snaps. "What does he want to buy?"

"One of the carvings in the cabinet," Jet says. He adds, "It's the color of my hair," as though this will change anything.

"You hear that? It's the color of his hair."

The way Ed says it makes his skin crawl. He still meets Ed's eyes.

"Well," says Ed. "Go get it for him."

Ruby stands up and disappears into the stacks. Despite how little Jet has told her about it— all she knows is the color— she comes back with the right carving, the red-streaked feathers visible to Jet's eyes. He's grateful she only leaves Jet alone with Ed for a few tense seconds.

"How much?" he asks quietly.

Ruby doesn't answer. Ed sizes up the carving and grunts, "Twenty."

Her expression is gutted, the way a Detroit house in the projects looks after twenty years of being used as a meth den. Jet has never been to Detroit, but he has been to plenty of meth dens.

He chews on his lip, a nervous habit he has only recently developed. His eyes dart from hers to Ed's and back to hers again. When Jet was growing up, he didn't have dolls of any ethnicity, even if he had had a father who would have let him play with them. He wonders if she, like him, loves to buy what she did not have as a child. It has taken Jet a long time to learn that you cannot buy certain things, even if you have money. He wonders if she has ever tried to buy more than she is able to.

Jet glances at Ed once again. He can guess one intangible thing she would buy if she could. It is this similarity to his past, this reminder of a version of himself clad in an orange jumpsuit that clashes with his hair, that keeps his fingers from closing around the carving in front of him.

Jet thinks back to those books with names so long he can hardly read them, and he remembers a conversation he and Leon had once, with Jet in the kitchen burning soup. He loves the classics, Leon told him, and Jet had forgotten to reply in favor of rinsing his stained apron. Leon loves the classics. The color of Jet's hair is not the only important thing in Leon's life.

Jet closes her fingers, larger and thicker than his, around the carving. "I think you have some books I might want instead," he says.

Ed is annoyed. Jet expected nothing less. "You're a waste of time," he grumbles. "Buy what you want and get out." He leaves, slamming the door behind him, but not before he mutters a word that might have been 'fairy' and probably wasn't. Jet doesn't really care.

"You know," says Jet, motivated by the thought that this woman is proud enough of her dolls and her carvings to put them in places that others can see. "This carving is really something. All of the stuff out there is. It's really beautiful." The words sound stilted and unnatural to him. He's not used to this, not used to trying for unnecessary kindness.

When she smiles it's a crack in granite, like one of the faces on Mount Rushmore ending its decades of silence and breaking into a grin, or at least what passes for one when you're made of stone. Jet heard once that Mount Rushmore used to be some kind of sacred Indian mountain, but he wouldn't know much about that. Thinking about desecration, Jet smiles back, finally remembering to let go of her hands.

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Nobody Likes A Blue Girl

The first time I kissed a girl I was in a mental hospital for cutting. I was fifteen. She would have been twenty or twenty-two. Her name was Kristen—it's since been changed to Sky or River, something natural. But what I liked about Kristen was her rejection of everything. She spat her chewed up dinner into napkins and shoved it down her pants. She'd also managed to smuggle safety pins onto a "no sharps" ward. And for that, she was a rock star.

Cutting wasn't her main thing. It was something she did when the bathroom stalls weren't available for sit-ups—there was a special 2-West crunch the girls could do while perched on a toilet seat.

For me, the razor's edge was the main event. At fifteen, I explained it this way: there was a lot of pressure built up inside me; if I made a small hole, some of it could get out. The way I see it now is the exact opposite—there was something inside that I couldn't reach. If I did a little digging, I was that much closer to that thing I longed for.

Since Kristen and I were locked up on different charges, I only saw her at mealtimes, community meetings, and on breaks. We met in the common room, where we played foosball, or piled up on small couches to watch *The Little Mermaid*. Kristen liked to sit as from the rest of us as a room would accommodate, scowling. I thought it was wonderful.

When I fell for her, she was tucked into a couch arm, clutching a lion-shaped pillow and sucking her thumb. I watched her for a while, bathed in the blue light of the television. Not a particularly beautiful sight. The lion's mane was an unraveling clump of dirty yellow yarn—I didn't begrudge her the thumb, but the animal was egregious.

Still, I liked the angularity of her face. I liked the spindly leg muscles curled up under her tiny blue shorts, her ratty blonde hair, and all the little nubs in place of her peeled off fingernails. Kristen was vicious to herself. She didn't seem to care about anyone else. And for that, I thought she was invincible.

I wanted her like I wanted that thing inside myself. I'd started on the opposite end of the couch and found I was slowly inching in to her. Then there was the feeling you can sometimes have when you know you're touching the edge of another person's bubble—the outer limit of their energetic field, if you will. Hers was buzzy and cold, and made the hairs stand up on my neck.

My chest tightened and I clamped my thighs together. I said, 'I like your hair.' It was long and full of knots and a natural white color I'd only ever seen on a toddler. I wanted to tug on it.

'I like your hipbones,' she said, which surprised me, then made me think she had x-ray vision—that's what it would have taken to see bones under my insulation layer of baby fat. More likely, she hadn't taken a real look at me; what she'd said was a rote pleasantry thrown around between ED girls.

Either way, I snuggled up to her, matching her pose by pulling my knees to my chest. I put my thumb in my mouth, too. We held hands while a cartoon crab sang to us, *Darling it's better, down where it's wetter, take it from me…*

We take such measures to deny the sensuality of children. But I'd always known what was true: there were men who found me sexy even at four and five. They told me so. My body still holds their secrets.

You might be asking, where were her parents? My mother and father believed that all pretty things should be worn on the outside, where the world could see. I was an accessory. Like a Rolex, keeping time, I appreciated with age. Until the day I went after myself with a box-cutter. And time stopped.

I had my first fashion show when I was four years old. I wore an off the shoulder dress, felt the spotlight on my skin. It was warm, blinding. I remember the soles of my feet slipping from the sides of

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my sling-back shoes. I jutted my hips to compensate for the slipping. When you watch the video footage from that day, the movement of my hips appears intentional, lady-like.

At twelve there was a sea change among my peers. Boys touched us, and we could talk about it now. We organized ourselves around new questions: how far, how deep, how many… With me, there was always a discrepancy between plan and lived experience. The answers I gave in advance never stood in the face of their advances.

The hunger for touch, to be reached, was too great. I opened my legs for boys and men. *Hold me*. I was twelve; then I was fifteen. When they were inside me, it was no different from those fruitless dives I took into my flesh with the blade. Fumbling around for a feeling, a destination, for the very heart.

Sometimes we'd strike on something together. And for a moment, I was split open, released. But one moment only delivers us to the next, where loneliness lights up again like a raw nerve, referring pain.

But this story takes place in 1999. Where we were was an eating disorder unit at UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute. A few of us didn't match that description; they simply didn't have a more appropriate place for us.

1-West was the upstairs ward, reserved for those patients whose violence was uncontained. And we 2-Westers were the "good patients"—high considerateness offenders, confining battlegrounds to our own minds and bodies.

Jason was just one step below 1-West. Ten days without Lithium had landed him on the roof of his parents' Mar Vista home, proclaiming to the world below that he could fly. His first day in treatment, he held tight to his beliefs. I witnessed his fortitude at the community meeting. Pumped full of Haldol and Ativan, there was wild rebellion in his bulgy blue eyes.

Day two the texture of his bubble was thick with loss. I felt it from three feet away. He was tall and sat very erect, staring intently at the floor in the center of our circle. He asked a room full of girls, with all the earnestness at his command, 'Why do they have to take it away from me?'

You couldn't say a thing like that in front of me. If ever I saw you hurting, I believed it was only right that you should be allowed to have sex with me. His eyes misted. Mad and bright and aqua blue, they were small tropical storms raining down on the chiseled rock of his cheek and jaw.

I was lit up with longing. I looked to Kristen and knew immediately she didn't share my feelings for Jason. She'd parked her chair decidedly outside the circle. Her tiny pale legs were dropped open, showing a sliver of green lace under the same blue shorts. Her arms were crossed over her flat chest and she swept the ceiling with her eyes.

Somehow I also knew she'd hold my feelings for Jason—or any man—against me. I sat on my hands through the rest of group, choking out the pulse between my legs by digging my nails into the backs of my thighs.

At fifteen, I knew nothing of loyalty. My moral compass spun in all directions, pointing to this, that, and every chance for love. Often, it pointed in two directions at once, as it did on 2-West. As a rule, I went with the closer, surer thing first. I'd use what was easy as a confidence builder for what appeared more out of reach.

Jason was gone into the grief that comes in the wake of a manic episode. Catatonia, I reasoned, was the definition of hard to get. With heaviness of heart—I deeply believed he deserved to fuck me—I put him aside. I put everything aside but my aim to become someone Kristen could love.

I'd seen enough to gamble she'd be drawn in with some intense relating. Not your run-of-the-mill girly shit, but a frank presentation of real pain. I wore short sleeves, brandishing my scars, as I had never dared to do in the outside world. After so many years of hiding, can you imagine the ecstasy I felt, sitting under an air vent in the common room, a gentle breeze bending my arm hairs? The sensation brought tears to my eyes.

A nod to solidarity, I mimicked her food disposal methods. Holding her gaze, I chewed solemnly and spat into paper napkins. I let her look all the way into me, until a rush of shame shot up my spine and my cheeks flushed. Of course, she wouldn't offer a comparable view. I only saw she that she was watching.

We passed a whole breakfast and lunch this way. Then, before occupational therapy, we had a good fifteen minutes to escape notice of distracted nurses herding girls from bathroom stalls. Kristen pulled me

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by the elbow.

Her room was a small icebox—after two months on 2-West, Kristen had earned herself a single. There was only a step or two from the door to a twin bed with unyielding springs, comforted in worn beige and gold flowers. The walls gave me a sick feeling in my stomach, painted the terrible blue of medical scrubs and bathed in fluorescent light.

Kristen had been caged long enough to behave as if this were the most natural habitat. She sat close, knees touching mine, apparently mesmerized by the excitement of my nipples. My tongue went dry and my underarms wetted—the anxious body's redistribution of fluids—and the mechanics of breathing were suddenly beyond me.

I'd never been with a woman before. My training to date was centered on the pleasure of men; as far as I knew that was my reason for being, my highest purpose. And Kristen, for all her bony androgyny, was something entirely other.

I sat very still as her ravaged middle and index fingers gently clamped my right nipple, evoking a strange hum from deep in my throat. I didn't know if it was audible to anyone living outside the confines of my skull, until she said, "Stop."

Her voice startled me. For the first time since lunch, I looked into her barren green eyes. They were red-rimmed and the skin around them was crinkled at the corners. "That adorable and sexy sound," she said. "Stop it."

Three loud thumps on the door shook me from my pleasure. I recognized them as coming from the fat hand of our OT therapist, Regina. "Krissy, you know better…"

Kristen and I devised an escape plan that included me hiding in the armoire while she staged a panic attack in the hall. For her efforts, she was awarded an extra Ativan. And I was granted safe passage to the hospital basement.

Kristen and I did not have OT together. I was lumped in with the other minors—most of whom appeared at least five years my junior, for their successful avoidance of all nourishment. I was keyed up as all hell. But to touch any of the other girls (even those who were older than me) was akin to molestation.

That afternoon Jason appeared among them. He stood a good two feet over their heads—a spooked giant looking out over a school of twiggy white nymphs with abnormally thick arm hair and bald patches under thin ponytails. He held his arms close to his body, as if he feared a loose swing would take out one of the little ones, and made his way over to me at the candle-making station.

The station, which I usually had to myself, was only a stack of white wax bars, some old crayons, a wick spool, and a spare selection of molds. Because I'd yet to "earn my sharps," Regina had to be summonsed for all wick cutting.

I was very shy. What do you say to a boy who's essentially just emerged from a coma? I ran a few stock phrases through my mind—*welcome back, good morning*—and blushed at their inadequacy.

Finally, I said nothing. I tended my melting wax lumps on the hot plate. He took the chair beside me and the edge of his bubble grazed my bare shoulder. Now the air around him was like a warm murky bath. "I'm back on my meds," he grumbled.

I nodded solemnly. The argument for Lithium was that without it, Jason might hurt himself or someone else. It didn't seem possible that Jason could hurt another person. His oversized hands and lips were chapped to bleeding from his twelve-hour roof top exposure. It was September, and if you asked me, the Santa Ana winds were strong enough to convince any of us to come unmoored.

"My girlfriend does that," he said, studying the inside of my arm as I stirred the wax. "I mean, my ex-girlfriend." He looked down at his dirty tennis shoes. This was sad news for him. But what I'd heard was that he (someone, anyone) could love a girl who did the things I did. I could be somebody's girlfriend.

For a junky like me, even the hint of love was as good as a shot in the arm. I let his warm murkiness wash over me and sank into the cozy haze of romantic delusion. I chose some pink and purple and blue crayons for my candle. The colors of the September sky I saw blazing behind us, as we stood, shoulder-to-shoulder on that Mar Vista rooftop. The Santa Anas howled in our ears. Yellowed leaves skittered down the sidewalk. *It's earthquake weather*, Jason said. He had a slippery, insubstantial quality. A lightness. You knew he could fall away anytime. But first, we would fly.

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Dreams die fast in the cold fluorescent light of a hospital basement. And the vision did pale as my eyes drifted from Jason's cracked hands over the sea of sexless nymphs. It died forever in the oily hotspot glaring from Regina's fat chin. Jason was still staring at his shoes, lost again to one of his catatonic stupors.

Then there was the funeral march that follows the death of dreams. My bones ached. A lead coat covered my limbs. The fight against going down with the ship rose up in a claw-my-face-off kind of rage. Before I knew what I was up to, my left forearm descended on the hotplate. For a single moment I was burned clean.

That compass I mentioned before continues to spin even today. It might point to this man, or that woman. Pointing to say this is, finally, your last chance at love. But with maturity comes stillness. Experience says something can mean the world one day, and mean almost nothing the next. That was also the lesson of cutting. Forcing me to wear yesterday's pain like it was still real, like it was still the world, the razor laid bare the lie of permanence.

Week two in treatment, I earned 2-West's equivalent of a hall pass—a supervised trip to the video store down Westwood Blvd. Finally, the hospital doors were breached. We lined up like muddy dogs for a hosing off in the night air. Stephanie, a twelve-year-old anorexic who'd lived her pre-lockup life almost exclusively on bubble gum, stuck her tongue far out into the wind to purge the taste of stagnation.

Kristen rushed to the head of the line. She cared not at all for the pleasures of momentary freedom, but she'd be damned if she wasn't first to reach the staircase at the end of campus. She'd told me in advance there were thirty-two steps. When she was on her game, she made it up and down five times before the psych nurse caught up with her. Exercise of any kind was strictly forbidden on 2-West. But Kristen would risk a suspended hall pass, even an extended stay on the ward. This was the nature of addiction: we were forever trading the future for a moment's grace.

I felt her bubble, charged with nervous anticipation. Her arms were straight and swinging and her knees hardly seemed to bend as she blew down the street. She wanted those steps more than she wanted any person, to the exclusion of all persons. By her own design, Kristen was untouchable. Even when we made love, she said, *I do the touching.*

In the store, she paced the aisles. Her long neck craning forward, she looked like a pelican just before it dives for a fish. I felt terribly abandoned. I swore to myself and to God, she'd never get anywhere near my tits again. I'd throw myself at the nearest taker. To that end, I turned to the Comedy aisle where the other girls were gathered. I stared into a sea of arrested development, narrow hips and flat butts. And my heart sank. There was no one else.

Unanimously, we chose *Weekend At Bernie's.* Perhaps the world had taught us all to feel like dead men, propped up by live ones. Certainly, that was how I'd felt as a child model, chauffeured around by my father from one audition to the next.

Strangely, I didn't feel that way as long as I was at UCLA. On 2-West, I'd let Kristen look all the way into me. I was seen. And Jason had said I could be loved, scars and all. I was starting to come alive. If insurance hadn't kicked me out of bed on the fourteenth day, I might have started to heal.

Healing can take a long time. In 1999, I had another fifteen years to reconcile the estrangement I felt from myself. In recovery we like to say, it takes what it takes. For me, it took years of waking up where I didn't belong. Of willful forgetting. And deep, bone-aching shame.

Finally, a man I loved grew tired of searching a dark house to find me curled up on cold concrete—clutching a bathmat between my knees, or under the kitchen table. In the beginning he said, *you're like a stray dog*. Daniel loved dogs. He scooped me off the floor, and kissed my hair as he carried me back to bed.

The places he found me were where I stashed my pills. I had a baggie taped to the underside of the kitchen table, and a tampon box lined with capsules. I didn't have words to tell him, the scariest things that happened when I was a girl had come to me in my bed. In the dark, I couldn't always know him from those other men. I had to knock myself out to be close.

Daniel's love was only human. It couldn't bear my weight without strain. Before long he said, *I won't wake up to a cold body!* And, *Nobody likes a blue girl*. I recognized his tone as the one my father

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took when he saw what I'd done to myself with the box-cutter. When he knew I'd never make him another dime. I fell on my knees. *Please don't throw me away.* I was thirty-one years old.

When Kristen finally kissed me, we were in a bathroom stall. She pulled for me to straddle her. I was reluctant, and did my best to lean everywhere but on her bones. I felt her teeth under her thin mouth; her slick tongue slid between my lips. The smallness of her face was foreign. I grabbed a fistful of her knotted hair and pulled on her gentleness, trying to make it into something hard.

No amount of pushing or pulling will make something into what it is not. All that day, I grieved the myth of her imperviousness, of her maleness. And I couldn't escape the taste of her. She was briny, like kelp. I wondered if all women tasted that way. If I tasted that way. Or if what I'd tasted was the oceanic abyss at the heart of her disease. No anchors there. Only drift.

The last day in treatment, you're as good as gone to the nurses. I had a long leash, and hours of unaccounted for time. I spent those hours in Kristen's room—no longer a cage to me, but a refuge. Finally, I'd stopped trying to make her into something she was not. Stopped grieving the idea of her maleness.

For the first time since I was a very little girl, I put down my reason for being, my aim to please. She touched me, and I didn't leave my body the way I always had. I felt her tongue inside me. I felt her and I felt her and I felt her. *That adorable and sexy sound*, she said. *Don't stop*.

All that time on 2-West, Jason and I never so much as brushed against one another. Probably the nurses were on to me and kept us separate. You can always count on older, more experienced women to piss on the fires of the untamed. In any case, I assume he is lost from my life forever.

Sixteen years after graduation (with certificate) from the ward, I ran into Kristen at a meeting of Narcotics Anonymous. She looked very old, but I'd have known her hair anywhere. Still bright white and full of knots. I smiled, because I'd been clean for some time. As far as I could tell, she didn't know me. She had the shakes, was still floundering. Still scraping the bottom of her abyss. When I closed my eyes, I could still taste her salty lips.

The chairs were set up in a circle, like they'd been for our community meetings. Only, she no longer thought to separate herself, or turn her back to the circle. I got up from my chair and took the seat beside her, not saying anything. Her bubble was still cold, and raised the hair on my neck. When we went around the room, she said, "I'm Sky. I'm an addict."

I put my hand on her back, between her shoulder blades. She was no longer thin. Like so many of us, she'd gone through the world replacing one addiction with another, until she landed here.

She had long blue porcelain nails in place of her ravage nubs. I whispered in her ear, "I remember you, Kristen." And when the tears ran down her face, I said, "It's okay. You're thawing out." That was the last time I saw her. I can't tell you if she's alive today.

Tonight I spoke at a small meeting of inmates at Brotman hospital. It's a dual-diagnosis treatment center on the west side of Los Angeles, with a lot less funding than UCLA. Among us were representatives from every disordered corner of the obsessive mind.

My name is Cat. I stood at a podium and told my story into a microphone for forty minutes. Meeting their eyes without shame. When I was done, a big-eyed girl called Wendy cried and shook in my arms. She said in my ear, *You saved my life tonight.* Would you believe that I'm a woman called upon to share her experience, strength and hope? That I'm the one telling you, you can come out the other side of this.

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The Lighthouse Keepers

When I was nine, a ship ran aground a hundred yards from my bedroom. At the time, I was burrowed beneath my covers, trying to ignore the whistling wind. Rain lashed my window, and every time lightning cracked, I cowered, as if the storm itself was searching for me in the bursts of light.

My parents, I knew, were awake, watching the light as it revolved, making sure that it did not go out for even a second. They never slept during storms, and nor did I, really. I felt, in some way I could not explain, that if I did not watch the sun come up, there was a chance it would not come up at all, and we would be left in our tower, in the darkness, forever.

The lighthouse was called Lime Kiln Light, and it stood on San Juan Island. It had belonged to my mother's father and had been a condition of her marriage. Her devotion to the light made up a good part of her being, and my father loved her, so he came to stay with her in the lighthouse after my grandfather died. He was not of the island, instead born in the woods of Washington state, and he never truly seemed at ease on San Juan. I think, now, that he felt marooned.

My mother loved the lighthouse and rarely left it. If she ever did, for instance, the time we visited my Aunt Maryanne in Canada, she was jumpy the entire time, as if without her, the light might topple and ships be lost at sea. I inherited her watchfulness, but with it came an awful guilt that I could do nothing to stop the various ships of the world from crashing into rocks. I was able to find none of my mother's contentment to keep the light shining. Rather, I lapsed into nonsensical rituals that I told no one about. I clicked locks three times to make sure they were really locked, looked left-right-left five times before crossing the streets, and never told anyone I loved "Goodbye" because it sounded final. I stuck to "see you later" or, during my British literature phase, "ta-ta."

I grew up much as my mother had, daughter of the lighthouse keepers, always smelling a little of salt and often with wind-burned lips. I listened intently to our two-way radio as ships passed us, whether in stormy or calm weather, feeling a sense of relief when they made it out of range and remembering every local ship that left port, not feeling quite right until they made it home.

On the night the *Sea Whisper* ran around, I was tapping the wall lightly. "*Once more and no ships will go down. Once more and no ships will go down. Once more—"*

There came a crash, louder than any wave. I heard a sickening crack, and shouts, carried and distorted by the wind. When I remember it now, I think that my whole room shook, but I know (or think I know) that must have been my imagination. Frozen, my hand mid-knock, I listened to the sounds of a ship breaking apart, almost drowned out by the howling wind and rain, and screams, made wild by the wind. Cold washed over me, like one of the waves outside.

When I came unstuck, I wrapped my blanket around my shoulders and poked my head out the door.

My father appeared, dressed in his yellow slicker. His face was white.

"Sarah, stay inside," he told me, and before I could reply, he was clattering down the stairs and grabbing for the phone.

"This is Lime Kiln Light," he barked into the speaker, "a ship has run aground."

Slowly, as he kept talking, I crept up the stairs to the light, where I knew my mother was watching the flame.

She did not notice me, intent as she was the wick below the Fresnel lens. As it turned, she looked out over the water. My eyes followed hers, to a cargo ship that had gone over. I could see someone in the water. The urge to shut my eyes came, but I kept them on the great swells. The wind whistled outside the light, and I imagined the glass shattering and cutting my mother and I to ribbons.

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I snuck closer to my mother, and without looking, she put her arm around me and we watched waves dash the big ship. I heard my father come up the stairs.

"I called the coast guard," he said. "Lillian, the boat.""No," said my mother, without looking at him, "you'd get yourself killed."

I knew that protocol was to, if one could, row out to help stranded mariners. I also knew that in this weather, a rowboat would be kindling before it was halfway to them.

My father cursed and descended the stairs. I do not know what he did or where he went. I only know that he could not stand and watch, and my mother could and did, and that was the difference between them.

My mother replenished the fuel for the light twice before the Coast Guard boats appeared. We stood, watching them rescue as many as they were able, while the light turned behind us.

I stayed numbly quiet. In the beam of light, I knew that as much as it had saved countless ships from wrecking, it was powerless to stop this one. The lens would do nothing more than illuminate the drowning men. My mother had dedicated her life to a building that stood uselessly still as sailors died. I looked east, where the horizon was just the slightest bit lighter, and I breathed out for what felt like the first time. My breath came shuddery around the lump in my throat.

"Why do we have to stay and watch?" I asked.

My mother adjusted the hood of her slicker.

"The lamp has to stay lit," she said. "Could go out in a storm like this." She looked back at the light itself, her brows furrowing. "And because it's part of the job. When you can't do anything else, you bear witness."

I did not say anything. I knew of witnesses in court, but never on the balcony of a lighthouse.

As dawn came, the storm died down. The Coast Guard had saved forty-seven of the crew of seventy. They had been on their way to Canada and were blown badly off course, and that was how it had happened. A few of the Coast Guard sat at our kitchen table, drinking my mother's lethally strong black coffee. My father and mother, when not answering questions, stood together looking out the kitchen window.

I heard my father say "If I had gone out in the boat…"

My mother replied, "There would have been one more dead man."

"Doesn't it kill you not to do anything?" he asked.

My mother said nothing, and crossed her arms with the resigned look of someone knows something they cannot explain.

I wanted to say, *she kept the light going!* because if he was saying that we had done nothing last night, it meant we had never done anything, and neither had my grandfather, and there was no point in the lighthouse at all, and that, above all things, terrified me, even though I had thought it myself, for the first time, last night.

And she had been a witness. I didn't exactly know what it meant, but I knew I had been one too.

For the rest of the day, the Coast Guard took their reports and cleaned up the wreckage, and I sat in the window seat with a mug of hot chocolate my mother made for me, watching everything.

That weekend, my mother took me for a walk by the seashore. She did not bring up the wreck, but when I began speaking, she knew what I was talking about.

"Don't you want to give up?" I asked.

My mother tore her eyes from the waves.

"Yes," she said, "sometimes, but I keep the lighthouse, because it is all I can do." She paused for a moment. "I asked the same question when I was about your age, and here's what my father said: 'Sometimes you have to make a choice: ignore the tragedy in the world because it's easier, or accept that you don't have much power, but you can use what little you have to help. And when you can't help, you can bear witness. That's a lighthouse keeper's job'"

I stood, sinking into the sand, and watched the waves fold the water seamlessly. There was no trace of the storm, or the wreckage, or the sailors. The shipping company had collected what they could, and the ocean had swallowed the rest.

I was more frightened, in that moment, of the sea's ability to completely erase someone or something from existence than I was of its ability to drown. I stepped back to where the sand was dry. My mother tucked her skirt up and waded up to her ankles.

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“You can’t solve every problem in the world,” she told me, “and you’d go crazy tryin’. But you can pick one thing and stick to it. I keep the lighthouse going.”

I wanted to ask, what should I pick? My mother was shading her eyes and looking out to sea, and she looked so far away I said nothing.

But as we meandered home, I asked for the names of the sailors who died. My mother did not know, so I just wrote “sailor” twenty-three times in my journal entry about the wreck. I supposed my father would think writing down the story was as pointless as manning the light had been.

We did not speak of the wreck again, except as a date “That was before the wreck,” or in explaining the news to other people. I did not cry until two months later, when I saw a dead bird wash up on shore, and then I sobbed bitterly, sitting on the rocks and watching the relentless waves roll in and out.

Before I turned ten, my father left, telling us that the sound of the ocean was keeping him awake at night. My mother nodded, as if she understood. He did not ask me to go with him, and I know I would not have. There was too much of my mother in me, too much dedication to the light. At first, I was bemused by his leave-taking, then, as a teenager, angry, and when I first struck out on my own for college, I thought I understood. Now, two years in, I’m not sure I do.

At night, in my city apartment, I listen to the weather reports for the coast of Washington, and when there is a storm, I tap the wall until I fall asleep. My mother calls me the morning after every storm to tell me if everything is all right, and usually, it is. There have been accidents, but never one as bad as the 1949 wreck that tore me from my bed.

A year ago, I ran into my father in a diner in South Dakota. It was completely by chance, which I wanted to think signified something, but still cannot divine what. He had not left an address and did not offer one when I saw him. I suppose I could have asked.

He remains far inland, where the sky kisses the shimmering ground at the horizon and the sounds of the sea cannot follow him. He told me he does not own a radio.

My mother stays on the coast, manning the lighthouse, and keeping a weather eye on the ocean.

I have not yet found a place where I can be still. When the sea is too near, it does not let me sleep, and I remember the night of the storm too often. I have nightmares of standing, powerless, watching ships run aground. Inland, the silence left by its absence drives me even more mad.

I have taken to filming, with my new kodak, everything I see that strikes me. At first, I was possessed with landscapes, most often water. When we declared war on Vietnam, I began going to peace marches. I filmed everything I could—the police dogs, the singing, the chants.

The news reports are as faceless as the twenty-three drowned sailors, but when I capture the light and dark on my film, I focus on the faces. I ask people their names, what they do, why they are here. Soon, I will sail too, to follow soldiers through the bush to bear witness to what we have done, to send it back, inscribed on film.

Once, at a rally, perched on a fence I had scrambled up and balanced on precariously to get a shot, the light glinted off my lens, and, for the seconds I was blinded, I felt not in danger of falling, but steady, steady as a lighthouse in a storm.

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Poetry Part II

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Russian Poets at the Beach

On this Tel Aviv beach, I watch them
from across the sand as their hands
tap, their fingers writing

invisible ‘z’s against the music
of their tongue, a language
of slipping through snow,

block after block of government high-
rise flats, cliffs in a dark dawn.
These women cough their way past

cigarettes and vodka, their hands
on dry, dyed hair in orange and brutal
black, washed in water sucked from stones,

eyes filled with years
of cold and coal heat,
shared bathrooms and two hour lines

to buy potatoes. They hold each
other gratefully, not
minding heated cheeks or grey

teeth, cough into each other’s mouths
or phlegm hacked hard
into a proffered cloth, they push

enormous chests against each other, bosoms
like toddlers carried high and proud—
I just want to settle my head

in their confidences,
travel their navels as an escape
route from my life to theirs,

muffle myself away

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from this daily job of filling bag
after canvas bag with sand, sand

that crawls into my eyes
and under my fingernails,
sand that will swallow a bullet,

withstand an explosion, sand as passive
as Tel Aviv's occluded air.
Each bag I mark with the letters, ג"ג

gimmel gimmel. Gvool Gizrah.
Set Boundaries.
A military symbol: Don't cross this line.

Don't come too close
to where the Russian poets
sit together in this land

of beige heat and heaviness,
of sandstorms and uzis
and New Israeli Shekels,

watch as the sun
stretches its athletic strength
deep into a mediterranean seas

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when you leave i will disappear or multiply

i learn love

in the language of drought

a thing so callous & animal

canopies rob rain and shade

as a means of obstruction

or thirst.

i learn to notch redwood

as things recede: riversides, hair-

lines, growing chasms

between two bodies

or riverbeds.

i learn a levee is

only as strong as its catastrophes &

we are

bound to dry

or breach

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hate the sin

but tell me again what choice she had?

a world, plaited with wonder, muddied.
crayons wept as her flesh burned
like funnels from flues
slagging black cotton sky;

her body and mind divided—
armies advancing under charred
points of fish fin guidons, unfurled
and pitched into the quickening.

she slaked thirst with curdled wormwood;
sliced her skin; stained garments with bloody
puss chuffing thrums of festered ruin;

harvested the sorrow of her one bedded thought,
a harrowing increase of insomnia.

what could she do?

stride into traffic
step off an edge
touch the third rail

or drag herself on ragged knees,
and rave through the streets of Gomorrah?

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“Why Are You Here, Why Do You Stay?”

[question asked by Crystal Good]

Call it home. Feel welcome there before anger rises,
before memory, realization, doubt.
Open that screen door, look out to witness cousins
tossing a football—so many they need their own country.
You don’t know their names but have walked
barefoot through the creek with them—
its rusty trickle breaking around rocks.

Why escape? Prison out there is the same as one in here, &
any cell can be sprightlier, more relaxed,
with photographs of loved ones,
a warm mug of coffee, & conversations about
doing unto others all the things that you’ve been done unto.

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Vigil For The Night

It too empties the sky scared and scarred by the light bulb
bleeding running to find an exit a refuge in the wounds
with a doormat saying *Welcome*
but now it's an emergency sign a fire sign
isn't it isn't the burning enough
to make you run Night from the manhole
you call home under the roof to prevent the rain
of embers from reaching your skin courage beauty
please breathe until a shadow presses its mouth
on yours for the breath of darkness you need to survive
one more Golgotha to keep lovers for a little longer
in the black they like to swallow each other in
hold the bright fangs of day away
trust me when I say if you decide to show up
no part of you will fray no part of you will melt
by another arsonist dawn

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Magicians at the Diner

We have lunch out to restrain us
from feeling like death
dealers in the sick kid
biz, trying not to shake
our heads watching a grinning infant
fading before us old folks
chewing our way to retirement.

We considered the venison meatball
sub, chipped beef and cream biscuits, veal birds
and ordered one grilled cheese, one tuna
and the waitress, in her sixties,
tossed her blonde hair back and laughed.

Yesterday we crowded a child's
misery until it lessened
and no detour removes
us from the bedside, watching
the monotonous cry disassemble a parent.

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For a Lost Ticket

I watch the moon flick
over orchard and fields
as I sift myself to sleep,
landing among the forgotten:
a doorway of snow, the sharp breath
of another century.

My parents are playing cards there,
homeless in the suburbs,
waiting for the conductor
to tell them to begin their lives.

And I chase them from station to station,
shaking their past before them.

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Three Brothers

--Exeter, NH, 1985

The grapevine unraveling its sour
constellation, and henhouse collapsed
like a lung. Our dog Ernie waited out
the last chicken, feathers erupting
between his teeth. And I can see my brothers
standing near the cellar door, one older
and one too young, goofing around or maybe
Josh running the bases in a Fenway Park
of the mind. We'd whack golf balls into
the woods until Brian grew curious and
burned one open, rubber guts hissing
black smoke. We concocted poisons so
devious we'd run sputtering from the basement,
family-strength mustard gas devouring whole
frogs in sadistic ritual. Not to mention the song
birds knocked from trees with a pellet gun,
jewelled in the grass like warm fruit. We made
fists and hurled accusations, pounded ourselves
more senseless than we already were until dad
thought it a good idea to don gloves and box
in the yard as Ernie barked and dad served
as a kind of benevolent referee. We fired bottle
rockets skyward until that got boring so we assaulted
each other, ducking and yelling *Wait! Stop! Not Fair!*
Year upon year stacked on itself like dinner plates
until we uprooted from that place and floated away
like those balloons we once set free, notes attached
asking whoever finds these please call, the excitement
of possibility, of adventure we believed we were
owed. The balloons wobbled skyward, shrinking
against the clouds, until they were harder to see,
until they were gone, and left were three brothers
looking up, each hoping his life was about to begin.

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Absolution

The way he holds you
back, hands boiling
with small bones spelling
desire. A push open; that
glittered thrum under breast
like blue jays clapping sunlight
from the pines. His knees
consider the weight of everything,
even what fills his mouth like
an offering to this life or the next,
night draining into night, until all
reason is reduced to the study
of a man's head in your hands,
and a sound like water: slow,
persistent—as if blessing your
name in a different tongue.

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Flag

It's nights like this I ask myself,
what is a flag? A fluttering
symbol of a nation's amplified
psychosis. A blood-drenched rag
dipped at the passing catafalque.
A handkerchief to wave at the
soldiers marching off to war,
marching against human failure.

Run it up the pole and see who
salutes it. Use it for swaddling,
a bandage after an accident, to
mop the feverish brow of one
unwell. A thing to dry your hands
on after throwing in the towel.

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Fragile

The quiet, being taken apart
for easy handling and shipping
the movers tip-toeing, their breaths
measured, working swiftly, yet
cautious. The quiet being sent
away, moved to another part of
town, in sound-proofed boxes, in
padded crates, in rubber cartons
marked 'Handle With Care'. You
can almost hear it, the way its
weight shifts, the dust being
disturbed, the absurd lengths
that the movers go to not to say
a word, their dark eyes rolling.

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Losing a Son

This,
I carry this
between breaths,
in the space that expects
the inhale and waits until it can't
wait any longer. I hollow my body, my
lungs lean together, and no matter how much I
want to stay in this brief flightless arc, some impulse
refuses death and I breathe white air that chokes like ash.
What did you do but sink silently into night? I wasn't looking. You
didn't warn me. There are too many breaths left that you left me holding
alone for you. Now what do I do with this space I'm carrying between the skies?

Alone with you, what do I do with the space I'm carrying between us? The skies
didn't warn me, and the many, many breaths left that you left me holding,
what did they do but sink silently into night when I wasn't looking?
Refuse death while I breathe white air and choke on its ash. I
stay here in want, in the brief flightless arc, the impulse,
my lungs leaning together, and no matter how long
I wait, I can't any longer hollow my body.
My inhale waits until it can't wait
in the space expected
between breaths.
This, I carry,
this.

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The Minotaur's Last Interview

I like circles, how each side sweeps behind me to shake hands.
I like the labyrinth, a path of circles the mind makes during sleep.
I watch the migration of birds and know the moon will soon whisper

to nights stretched out like shadows, blue curves on blistering snow.
I learn what loneliness means by the way my heart lurches at the sound
of bullfrogs singing on wet rocks. Everything I love is gone –

the larkspur that held the rivers in place, the frieze of wild blackberries
in the hills. I'm sorry I have no anger anymore. The fire I had inside me
became smoke, became ash. I know that's less than impressive.

When I pray, it's like this: forgive, forget, forgive. I can't think of a reason
to keep praying. My soul speaks out loud. It asks, *Who are you?*
My body speaks out loud. It answers, *Me*. So it goes – more circles.

Do you wonder what I do with my days? I balance them on the tips
of my fingers. Do you wonder what I do with nights? I gather them
with broken poems, send them home on the backs of snails.

No more questions, please. No one needs answers that float away
like cottonwood seed. Here, take the attitude of mourning and bow
your head. Bind the pieces of yourself like sticks tied with string.

When you write my story, don't leave out any part of it, even the ending.
Suffering doesn't have to be so formal, or so restrained. The only thing
left to do now is wait. I won't remind you I never asked to be born.

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Running

after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida

That slick floor.
The light at the end of the hall.
The afternoon breaking into pieces of glass.
The pop pop pop of the breaking.
The running.
All those children running across the parking lot.
They will run every nightmare into the street.
I tell the doctor I limp when I run.
There is a pop of pain in my hip.
The X-ray says arthritis.
The doctor points, says see this space –

so little is left.

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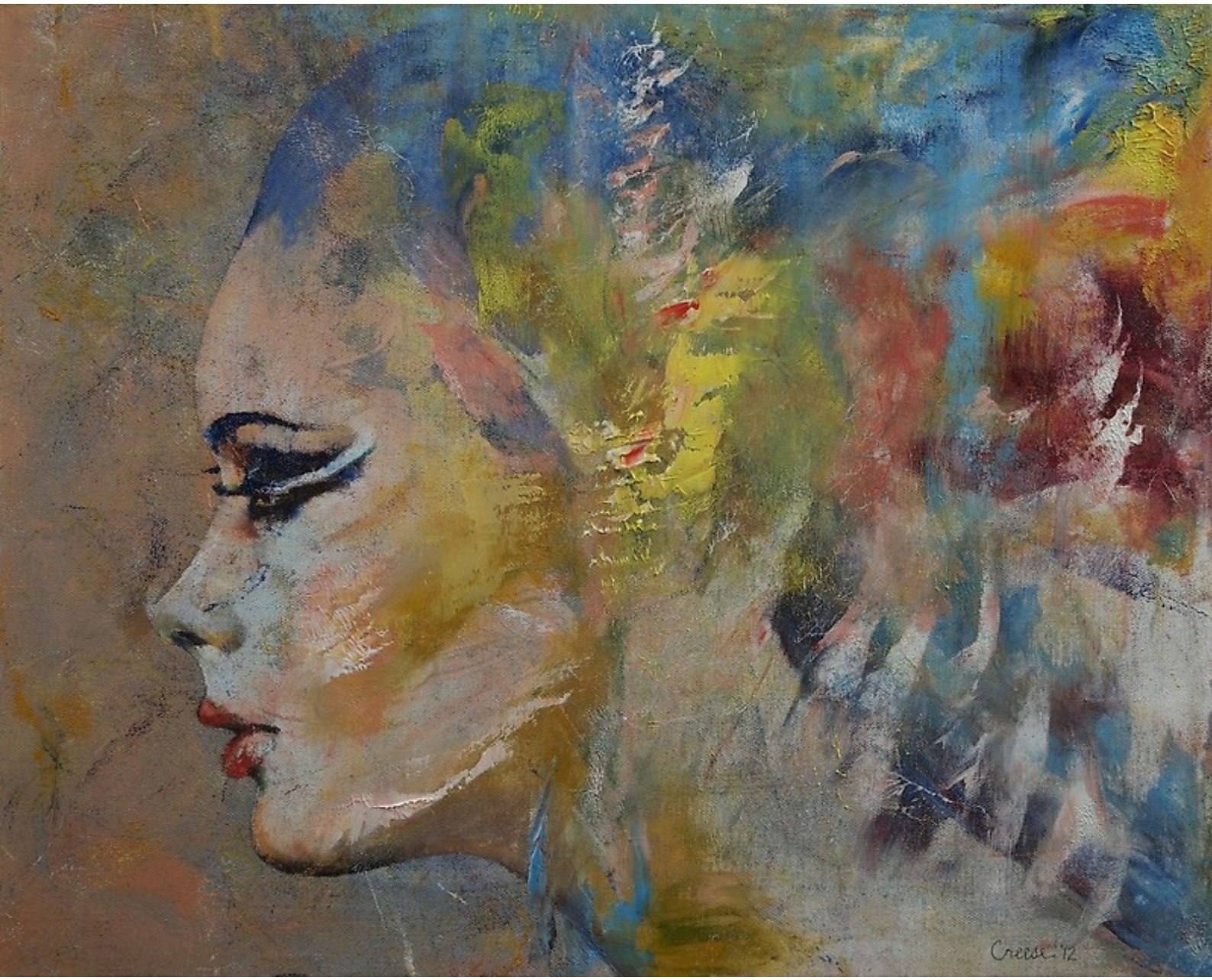

Fiction: Part II

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How Easy It Is to Make a Ghost

"She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening." – Angela Carter

Faye winced every time she walked into the welfare office. The doors, thick with grime, always clanged shut behind her right as she grabbed her number to wait in line. This time the small slip of paper read 16, and Faye smiled. The wait would be shorter than usual.

She walked to the back of the line and claimed her place behind a fat man picking his nose. Once he noticed she was there he politely removed his finger, but only to wipe his snot down the side of his sweat pants. It seemed as if there were always someone new to torture Faye when she came to the welfare office. Today it was the fat man and his greasy boogers; last week it was the baby who cried for hours. She tried to hide her disgust behind a book she pulled from her purse, but the crowded office made it hard to concentrate. She maneuvered the book until it blocked out most of her fluorescent hell, and eventually the book turned hours to minutes.

Faye finished her book and noticed the fat man standing behind the duct tape that separated the people from the windows. After him it was her turn and, as Faye waited, she looked around the room and shuddered. Gray, dusty, miserable: the place reminded her of a prison. The worst time always came when she could no longer disappear into another world, and she had to face the ashen waste of the welfare office. Still waiting, she tapped her hands against her thighs, a nervous habit from childhood.

The fat man crossed the threshold, and Faye took a breath. It was her turn next, and she wondered who would assist her. She rarely saw the same clerk twice.

She peered at the board above the windows, waiting for the electronic display to flash her ticket number in its accusatory, red digits. The minutes turned back to a slow crawl because, despite fifteen windows, only three were ever staffed. Even when a window opened, the inscrutable clerks waited to call a new number. The fat man had already been serviced and had departed the building, but Faye's number still did not flash.

Faye grew more anxious as she noticed an available clerk methodically stamping papers. She wondered what the stamp was for and why the papers required it. Surely it could not be that important since the clerk stamped paper after paper second after second with hardly a glance. She took a deep breath, but Faye could not stop her heart rate from rising to meet the stamp's quick thumping.

Her eyes dried; she was on the verge of a panic attack – she feared the thumping was somehow bragging to her – but she could not depart nor move forward until the display gave her permission. Finally, and without making a sound, the display screamed at her: "16!"

The thumping stopped when Faye reached the window, and she uttered her plea, "Hello, my name is Faye Kappa…"

She could never quite articulate to the clerk exactly why she was there.

Without looking at Faye, the clerk turned to a computer screen and commenced typing.

"I'm sorry Ms. Kappa, but your entitlements have expired."

Faye let slip a nervous laugh. It must have been a joke. "What do you mean my benefits have expired? I'm looking for work, and I haven't been out of a job that long."

"Yes, I see, but cuts were put in place to pass the new tax bill, and you no longer qualify for entitlements. You haven't had a job interview in 6 months… You should've gotten a notification in the mail."

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"What? I don't understand. Mail notifications? I use email. I gave you my email addresses. I've moved twice since I first applied." Faye said trying to keep her voice steady. "I've been looking for work. I can't help that I'm not getting call backs. And what about my son?"

The clerk, clearly annoyed at having to continue the conversation, stated: "I would suggest updating your address and giving a forwarding one when you move. As for family assistance and CHIPs, everything I've said still applies."

"I don't understand," Faye repeated, now unable to keep her voice from wavering.

"Ms. Kappa, you should read the notifications we sent you and the new guidelines before returning," the clerk said.

Faye tried to muster questions, a defense, anything that might garner a response that actually explained what was happening, but the stamp began thumping again. She lingered too long at the window, silently sobbing, until someone pushed her out of the way.

Dazed, she glided back to the filthy doors. She pushed, but they resisted. For a moment, her terror returned. Maybe the welfare office did not merely resemble a prison. She uttered a squeak and pushed as hard as she could. Finally the doors relented, burping her into the city.

Relief temporarily washed over her. *It's amazing how leaving only takes a few seconds, but coming in takes hours,* she thought.

She tried to collect her thoughts, but the bustle of the sidewalk granted no reprieve. The flow of bodies and bikes, buses and cars, caught her like a swift stream, and Faye did not want to drown.

As she bobbed with the city's current, she saw her situation more clearly. She was already a month and a half past due on rent, and if she did not make her next payment she would be evicted. She had planned on using her assistance to make that payment, but her more immediate concern was food. She had some scattered money in her purse, but she took heart that there were already rice and eggs in the cabinet. She could stretch that food enough to last the next week, if she shopped right and ate less than her son. Plus, she figured, she had at least that long before collections were knocking at her door. That calmed her nerves somewhat, but her mind returned to rent.

Rent. *Rent*. *Rent*. The word pricked her like she was lost in a thorny wood, thrashing through the vines. If only she could pay with her blood, she would, but she had already donated to augment her meager income. Faye had the crushing realization that she would never put her degree to use, and it was time to find a minimum wage job as if she had never gone to school in the first place.

She shook her head knowing that on top of feeding and housing her child, she had to pay back her student loans. They were never far from her mind, and now the thought of them struck her like a stone. She placed a hand against her forehead, squeezed, and then rubbed as if trying to erase the thought. Paying the minimum each month did not even cover the interest, and now, four years out of college, she owed more than when she graduated. With a minimum wage job, she would never escape the debt load. She gulped audibly and looked around at the gray bodies marching next to her during the lunchtime rush. She hated them. Their expensive briefcases and suits mocked her for not learning accounting or engineering.

She had earned a degree in history, and she bitterly remembered trying to find a job. Month after month, each interview was a new humiliation. They always passed her over for someone with a "real" degree, and once she tried to find teaching jobs, public schools passed her over because she did not have an education degree and then private schools because she did not have a Master's. By that point, Faye could not afford the cost to either get a new degree or a more advanced one. It was not just the price; she got pregnant, too. Once it became obvious to employers that she was both pregnant and undereducated the interviews became curiously shorter.

After discovering her pregnancy, she decided to have an abortion, but her state required she undergo an ultrasound before the doctor could proceed with the operation. By the time she had saved up enough money to pay for the ultrasound she had exceeded the legal time-limit on having an abortion. Rather than face a nasty back-alley procedure, she decided to have her son whom she ended up loving dearly.

She considered him her lucky charm because shortly after his birth she landed an internship. It was for a start-up, and it paid ten dollars an hour. In theory, her job was to manage the social media accounts, but in reality she got coffee, answered phones, and occasionally took notes in meetings. Her boss often told her, with a smile, that the marketing department had everything under control, and then he would show her the empty coffee pot in the break room.

After the internship ended, she was not surprised the company did not offer her a full-time position. It

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became patently obvious a few weeks in they wanted a secretary they could pay as an intern. Again, she could not find a job, but by then Uber had come to the city. That worked until eight months ago when her green Ford Focus broke down, and it would cost more to fix then the car was worth.

Government assistance was the only thing keeping her from destitution. *That apparently has come to an end* she thought as she reached her building. She had always feared cuts to benefits, but she never dreamed it would happen so fast.

Exiting the river of productive men behind her, she rested on the stoop of her apartment complex. Faye scrunched her nose as she gazed up at the steel monstrosity. It was covered in bird shit. *Yuk,* she thought, *it looks syphilitic.* Then she started giggling as she noticed the round shrubbery to the left and to the right of the building. There was no quashing the laughter now, and it burst from her like a hurricane.

"Maybe it really is," she said out loud, now unable to control the volume of her voice. Faye could feel the flow of the sidewalk damming and people turning to stare at her. When she turned around Faye tried to catch her breath, but the looks of horror from the people on the sidewalk only made her laugh harder. They thought she was insane, maybe homeless.

Faye howled with laughter and needed to sit on the steps to stop her fit. A few moments passed and she wiped the tears from her eyes. She walked into her complex and chuckled as she whispered modified lyrics to her son's favorite cartoon: "who lives in a penis above the sea…Spongefaye Poverty Pants."

She stopped by her elderly neighbor's apartment to pick up her son. The familiar pang of guilt stabbed her as she knocked on the door. Faye lacked enough money to pay the old woman for babysitting. But the door opened and the old woman did not appear upset. She lived alone and far away from her family. Faye supposed -- or at least told herself -- the old woman enjoyed looking after her son. The only days Jim required babysitting were Sundays when Faye went to the welfare office, after all. The rest of the week, school acted as daycare.

Jim ran to her and yelled, "Mom!"

She felt the ghost of happiness as she scooped up her son and thanked her neighbor for the help. She set her son down, and they walked hand-in-hand down the hall.

She opened the door to their tiny one-bedroom apartment, and the momentary happiness she had felt a second before evaporated. Faye looked at the peeling wallpaper and the ratty couch she had bought at Goodwill. *It can get a lot worse than this*, she imagined.

"What's wrong?" Jim asked.

Faye smiled. Her son was young, but he had a nose for sensing other people's emotions. "Nothing," she replied, "Take off your shoes and close the door."

She walked over to the kitchen and peered into the pantry. She stared at the near emptiness for a long time. They would be eating rice and eggs for the foreseeable future. The situation demanded creativity if she hoped to get Jim to eat the same thing every day. He could be fussy when it came to food.

He won't be when he's hungry. She rubbed her forehead again and turned around to see Jim plopped on the couch. He turned on the TV and browsed Netflix. Normally she limited his television intake to only two hours a night. Faye nearly began to remind her son of the rule, but then decided to say nothing. They would not have Internet much longer.

She bit the inside of her cheek. She had not really thought about the cost of the Internet; losing it would make finding decent work that much more difficult, assuming they avoided eviction. She decided to make Jim turn it off to push the worry away. They did not have cable, but that did not matter. On top of Netflix, she had the dusty VHS tapes she had inherited from her mom.

She grabbed an old copy of Barney, her favorite show as a child. She popped it in the tape player and went back to cooking dinner. As the music began to play, she sang a version of the theme song to herself that felt more appropriate: *I love you/ you love me/ I want to hang myself from a tree.*

Faye ate like a church mouse at dinner, and after she put her son to bed she began to feel it. The hunger amplified her anxieties and she could not focus on the TV any longer. She knew if she went to bed she would lie there tormenting herself with all the awful possibilities the future held for her, so she decided to do something she normally did not do. She was going to get drunk, and smoke away the hunger pangs. She grabbed the dusty bottle of vermouth from the cabinet – the only alcohol she owned – and walked out the door.

There were six cigarettes in her purse, and Faye walked down stairs to sit on her apartment stoop next to the bushes. They provided enough cover to smoke and drink in relative privacy. She lit one, feeling

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like a teenager hiding from her parents. The cigarette tasted like relief, and she uncapped the bottle of vermouth. She had no idea how old the booze was, or if vermouth could even *really* get you drunk, but she did not care. The allure of escape was too strong, and she swilled a few healthy gulps like a sailor on leave before lighting another cigarette. She did not stop till she forgot her hunger, and then she stumbled to bed.

Faye woke up at 6 a.m. and rubbed the bridge of her nose to ease the building storm of a headache. Terrible dreams had kept her up all night, and she tried to ignore the coming day for a few minutes longer. Eventually she groaned and heaved herself from the comfort of the covers.

A hot shower made her feel fresh. She roused her son from his bed, made him eggs, herself a cup of coffee, and brought him to school before she went restaurant to restaurant like she was in 10th grade again. She ignored the grumbling in her stomach and tried to translate her physical hunger into hunger for the job she knew she needed to find.

"The sun is shining for once," she whispered to the city, "and I am taking the initiative."

She tried the power of positive thinking, but it wasn't really working. The day passed as she went from one fast-food restaurant not hiring to the next to find work, and now she came to the last one she could get to without a car. Faye looked up at the big crown on the building's roof, panic easing its way through her veins. Her resume fluttered, but not from the wind. This was the first place to have a "HIRING" sign in the window.

She did not even consciously know why she brought her resume to fast-food jobs. It was not a career that required one, but she did it anyway. She had gone to college; college graduates had resumes.
The giant, inflatable crown that rested atop the building flapped in the breeze. The regal building invited her in as the automatic doors swung open for two businessmen leaving. The smell wafted after them, but when it reached her nose it made her nauseous rather than ravenous. She found the oozing stink of processed cow and fried onions disgusting, but not only because the food was sickening. This restaurant was the last stop, and she had to go in.

She walked inside.

"Can I take your order?" the elderly man behind the counter asked her.

"Well, uh, well," Faye stammered, "I saw your 'hiring' sign, and I wanted to speak with a manager about a job. I have a resume if you'd like to see it." She cringed. *He doesn't care,* she thought as she offered him the paper.

"Just a second," he said.

The manager arrived with a plastic smile and considered Faye with dead eyes.

"Hello, I hear you want to see about a job. Well why don't you go ahead and have a seat." He gestured to an empty booth.

As he sat down he actually did take her resume. Faye was surprised.

He read it over, nodding his head. Faye thought she detected the hint of a smirk at the corners of his mouth, but maybe that was how his face rested.

"I see, I see," he said.

"Do you see a job for me?" Faye asked, hoping some levity might improve the situation.

"No."

Faye blinked so hard her head snapped back.

"You don't have a job, or you don't have a job for me?"

Now he was smirking. "We aren't hiring any longer, just forgot to take the sign down. Actually, hold on." He held up a finger to her face and turned around.

"Hey Phil, yeah, you, Phil," he yelled at the startled cashier. "Take the sign down from the window when you close up, k?" Phil nodded.

The manager turned back to her. "Yeah Phil's my main cashier but I have three others too, and I just interviewed some cooks with experience. Do you have any? I didn't see any on your paper."

Faye realized this was a cruel man. He enjoyed the power of hiring and firing. He enjoyed people having to have his permission to live. But she would deal with that attitude, and she was not going to give up. She would go home a woman with a job.

"I can cook. I cook every day."

"Well that's not really the same thing, is it?"

"What about a janitor?"

"The workers share custodial duties."

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He stared at her, waiting. She stared at the table.

"Please," she muttered.

His smirk transformed into a beaming smile. "What was that?"

"Please, I can't go home without a job," she said.

He ignored her pleas, having gotten what he wanted. "Ok well I have your paper. I'll keep it on file," he said as he ushered her to the door. She stepped out into the cold night air.

Defeated, she joined the trickle of people still on the sidewalk to drift toward her apartment. She tried to stay optimistic, telling herself there was tomorrow, but all of her failures were getting increasingly difficult to ignore.

She'd pick Jim up from her neighbor and try to strategize for tomorrow. *Get the minimum wage job, then get back on benefits*, but thinking about tomorrow felt like defeat.

"You can't even get a fast food job," she said swallowing back the tears. It was supposed to be the job she could turn to once she felt her degree had really failed her. She had resisted it to this point because she did not want to be on benefits forever in part-time work, nor did she want to be buried under debt for the rest of her life. The albatross of stress resting around her neck nearly drove her to the cold concrete, but the neon light on the corner caught her eye.

The red light buzzed its message at her: Liquor & Wine. The hangover from the vermouth still haunted her empty stomach, but she needed to fill it with something. She paused on the sidewalk and shrugged her shoulders thinking, *Alcohol is still calories.* She started to move toward the entrance before realizing she did not have any money. The thought made her jolt upright and clutch her purse as if clutching it would magically make it worth something. Her hand depressed the bag against her body, and

Faye felt the outline of her few possessions on her thigh. She knew what was there without even looking, a tampon, a comb, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, errant Kleenexes, and some loose change. She slipped her hand in the bag without looking and removed the pack of cigarettes. There was one left.

Faye lit it outside of the liquor store and whispered to her reflection in the glass, "I wonder how much change is in my purse?" She had been afraid to look since yesterday because it comprised the bulk of her net worth, but she wanted a drink or at least another pack of cigarettes.

A lightning bolt of guilt struck her as she thought about spending the money on alcohol and cigarettes. Before she could process the feeling, she shook her head, the cigarette sending smoke dancing in front of her eyes, and savagely unzipped her purse. She did not want to think too deeply about what she was doing.

She pawed through her purse and, to her delight, she found a few crumpled dollar bills among the change. She had enough for another pack of smokes, but not enough to satiate her thirst. The neon light flickered and Faye thought, *Let's just see what they have.*

The doors chimed when she walked through them, and the store was brighter than she anticipated. The fluorescent lights reflected off the white linoleum floors to give the place an eerily sterile feel. She squinted and saw the store was not large. There were three aisles of liquor and one of wine surrounded by refrigerated glass holding beer. She crossed the linoleum toward the whiskey while surveying who else was there. A hairy man in a white tank-top sat behind the counter lost in the screen of his iPhone, and a young man was sweeping the floor. She was the only customer, and that made her nod her head, agreeing to a plan she hadn't even been aware she'd made.

She reached the whiskey aisle and thought, *You're like a drunk Jean Valjean, it's ok.* The thought brought a smile to her face, especially when she saw that the pint of Jack cost double what she had. A quick glance at both men, she slipped it in her purse and walked toward the cashier.

Ka-*boom-THUD, Ka-boom-THUD, Ka-boom-THUD*, Faye's heart broadcasted her guilt to anyone paying attention, but neither the hairy cashier nor the sweeping young man paid her any mind. When she reached the counter, the cashier finally looked up from his phone.

"Can I help you?" He asked automatically.

"I, um, I…Just a pack of Marlboro lights please."

Faye felt certain he knew, that he had triggered a silent alarm, that the police were on their way, that momentarily she'd be in jail for theft, but instead he put the cigarettes in front of her and asked for money. Faye paid.

The beating of her heart was like a motor that carried her out the door, but she waited until she rounded the corner to cheer. She finally felt like she'd had a win, and she did a little dance as she glided

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toward a small park at the end of the street that she liked. The arc-sodium bathed her in yellowish orange, and Faye basked in her victory beneath it.

The park was neatly hidden down a small side street, and Faye loved it because hardly anyone ever went there. It was too small to jog and it was too overgrown for a picnic, but Faye loved the withered bench that faced an old live oak. To her satisfaction, no one was there.

It was dark inside the park. It did not have its own lamps, and the light from the street only provided a distant glow. Faye sat on the bench and unscrewed the top of her bottle. She drank deeply.

"Ah!" she grunted, wiping her mouth. The whiskey burned its way to her soul, and Faye lit a cigarette. Exhaling, the triumph she had felt ended. Illuminated only by the cherry of her cigarette, Faye saw her misery. She was alone, in a park, drinking stolen liquor, and smoking the money she had for food.

Spiders spun webs of anxiety in her empty stomach when suddenly relief washed over her. Partly it was from the booze, but there was something else. The something that helped her sleep at night: she could kill herself.

Faye had never thought too hard about the implications of what she did each night. Lying in bed, thrashing against covers that oppressed rather than comforted, thoughts of death were the only thing that could lull her to sleep. Fantasizing about the ways she could do it calmed her, and imagining the peace of a parked car in a garage was better than the Sandman at sending her to sleep. She knew these thoughts were unhealthy, but they did not alarm her because whenever she began to think about them during the day, they became a source of worry: renting a car would cost money, no way could she afford a gun period, hanging seemed too scary, etc.

Half the bottle gone, she took to lighting each new cigarette with the butt of the last. Faye wanted to dull her senses, blur her thoughts, because the oak tree in the park looked as sturdy as the gallows and it beckoned to her. The autumn leaves hanged from its branches already looked like the condemned, so why not join them?

"Stop," she said out loud, "You have your son." But the excuse felt weak. She began to wonder if he'd be better off without her anyway.

Suicide had always played a part in Faye's thinking but as a morbid joke. When she was an ambitious student and received less than an A, she and her friends would joke, "Well we can always overdose on Adderall," but it was always followed by laughter. The joke stuck, but the laughter withered. It bothered her that the thought of suicide made her feel so much better, until she read a novel called *the Jailing of Cecelia Capture*, or, more appropriately, the quote that began the book: "The thought of suicide is a great consolation. By means of it one gets through many a bad night." She liked that suicide, strangely, was a way to feel in control. And that's what terrified her now.

She felt powerless to stop taking off her belt. She stood up from the bench and walked toward her oak tree, the orange glow of the street lamp receding even further behind her. Last sip, she tossed the bottle into already littered grass, and reached the tree enveloped by the darkness of the park. There was only one branch low enough for her to hook her belt over it. She took one last drag of a cigarette, stuck her head through the loop, and dropped her weight as hard as she could.

Eyes bulging, grasping for air, the buckle pinched her skin hard enough to draw blood. Blackness moved across the corners of her vision, accompanied by a pleasant buzzing sound in her head. There was another sound, though, a bit more distant, but close enough for her to register a crack.

Then Faye crashed to the ground, broken branch following on top of her. She pulled air into her lungs that felt like fire, and her gasps for life soon turned to laughter as she rolled onto her back and lit another cigarette.

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Chalk Talk

Foghorns blasted my eyes open. At first I thought I was adrift at sea, but the homeless assured me that I was solidly on the North Coast. They were rattling along outside, pushing their grocery carts full of glass bottles through the morning murkiness. Each clank sounded like a celebration of survival, which was enough motivation to get me out of bed. The faded purple Victorian house I lived in was only three blocks from the recycling center. I was right on the bohemian thoroughfare, and saw glints of thanks in sunken eyes each month when I gave away my latest stash of empty bottles.

The home had been subdivided into apartments and everyone had their own entrance. But Moe was the one who held it all together. The landlord described him as a kind of "mother hen" who, somewhere in his fifties, watched over the house and took care of landscaping and the courtyard, a walled garden with a gated entrance to the side yard. Trap doors led down to his basement apartment. When he wasn't sitting in his outdoor teepee and smoking weed, he was tending plants or playing with his cats. His garden was ready to rise with tomato, pea and zucchini plants along with year-round salad greens. He'd donate most of it to the community. I occasionally saw him riding around in a convertible Cadillac, driven by a neighbor up the street. She was a young woman with reddish dreadlocks. I figured they were related somehow.

After a year, I still hadn't had a bona fide interaction with Moe, other than a wave or a hello. Yet his life, at least the above ground portion of it, was in full view from the bay window in my bedroom. Moe preferred to communicate by leaving chalk messages on the sidewalk. Last night he'd written his latest dispatch in big white letters:

NO BUTTS!

My brain couldn't quite figure it out after pulling long duty at the library as a graduate research slave. I was studying marine biology and Moe's words were still dancing in my mind among kelp forests, but now it made sense. The lesbian couple had been throwing cigarette butts out the bedroom window and onto the sidewalk. Moe had this thing about neatness, which went above and beyond California law. And that's why he probably preferred the temporariness of chalk. The rain, before retreating into mist, would conveniently wash it away.

I'd never actually seen him scrawl a message, so he must have adopted his own stealthy, catlike abilities. He'd make his point, usually in three words or less, then go back to playing mother hen. For a moment there, I was trying to slay the grogginess and determine what day it was. It didn't help that the guy downstairs, who lived with the lesbians, was addicted to amphetamines and was playing his tambourine most of the night. The homeless, meanwhile, had to keep rolling no matter what day it was. The hefty Jamaican woman upstairs was now dropping pans in her always-smoldering kitchen. In any case, it was time to wake up. I needed caffeine almost as much as I wanted to see the blissful girl at the café down the block.

*

When I entered the café, Sage was chatting up customers as usual. By now, she didn't need a name tag.

"Hey Casey," she said. "Late night?"

I nodded.

Sage's flowing hair was as dark as black tea, and she always had it done up in some new way. Today she had it in a simple ponytail that swung from the back of a canvas baseball cap as she blended and frothed.

At least she didn't seem so pissed off at me anymore. She'd stomped off in a huff after I made some

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crack about new age beliefs and shamans and whatnot. Sometimes she was short with me while at other times she hovered by my table and asked personal questions. Her tendency to linger wasn't necessarily proportional to her workload, juggling everything with the ease of a short order cook. She was taking a semester or two off after her sophomore year in college to "find her real path." Besides being a barista, Sage was a yoga instructor, but didn't refer to it as her second job (as I mistakenly did). Rather, she was merely "sharing her practice."

Her breezy disposition and exotic phraseology seemed like a vacation from the data-driven people at school, and school seemed like a vacation from my previous life. I had returned to the campus and physical sciences after eight years of spinning aimlessly in the primordial soup, also known as the corporate world.

I'd gotten to the point of asking her out many times, but was always getting sabotaged by the clientele or paying the price for saying the wrong thing. I wanted to be more than a customer, more than a contributor to her hand-blown, circus-colored tip jar. As it turned out, she had to leave early to pick up her sister at the airport for a three-day visit. I was relieved on one level. I could fine tune my proposal, as if it hadn't been fine tuned enough. As I sipped the chai latte, I savored every spice those little hands had sprinkled together; she didn't cheat by using pre-made concentrate. As Sage was pushing her way out onto the sidewalk with a bending yoga mat and sliding backpack, she looked back.

"Hey," I said. "Where can I score some chalk?"

"Chalk?"

"The kind you use on a chalkboard? I was wondering if there's a gift shop nearby." Chalk had become extinct in our department at the university.

She laughed and glided back my way. "I have many colors to choose from." She opened her backpack and handed me a box. "I normally work in pastels," she said, "but I'm volunteering for a street art project. You know, for kids."

"Street art in this rainy climate?" I asked.

"It's actually on chalk boards indoors at the community center."

"That's terrific," I said. "I imagine it's a whole different way of expressing yourself."

She was beaming now, more so than usual. "Maybe I'll show you sometime."

For once, I'd said the right thing. Thanks to Moe, Sage and I had a new connection and it was over calcium carbonate, no less.

*

That afternoon I careened into a cleaning frenzy in my apartment, realizing that it was only a matter of time before Sage would see it. The wood floor cleaner brought out a shine not seen since I'd moved in. The kitchen was going to present the biggest challenge. To give myself a boost, I turned up the stereo and let reggae's rhythmic heartbeat rattle windows. I figured Moe might like a taste of Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff and Lee "Scratch" Perry down in his subterranean other world. The bathroom came next and then there was a big pile of dirty clothes to deal with, which I decided to put off until tomorrow. As it turned out, I was running out of time. I was supposed to go sea kayaking at night with some other marine biology geeks and it was time to head for Humboldt Bay. On the way out, I saw a new missive from Moe in his trademark white lettering:

TURN DOWN MUSIC

I ran back upstairs and grabbed a green piece from Sage's chalk stash and wrote diagonally:

SORRY

When I returned that evening with a tired back and cold hands from paddling hard for several hours, both chalk messages were gone, washed away by a squall. I fell asleep hard and fast, only to awaken in the middle of the night. I was drawn to the bay window by what I thought was the scratching of chalk on concrete. I went back to sleep after I saw that it was only the speckling of coastal rain.

The sun, of all things, stirred me from bed Monday morning. I was too cheap to put up curtains, and that yellow-orange ball didn't show up often enough to justify them anyway. I marveled over the blue sky. I figured I'd take a walk on the beach while I was waiting for my clothes at the laundry. When I returned home, there was a new message from Moe.

PACKAGE UNDER KAYAK

I looked around but the wrought-iron gates to the courtyard were closed and I didn't see marijuana

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smoke billowing from Moe's teepee. I reached under my boat and found a cardboard mailer. Thank God, it was my undergraduate diploma. Actually, my second after the first one disappeared in the cross-country move and required a bigger paperwork process than getting accepted to college in the first place. I made a note to pick up a simple black picture frame while I was out and about. It deserved to go up on the wall. I put a green checkmark next to Moe's message.

*

I had to go into work early on Tuesday when the weather was heading more toward its natural state of dampness and diffused light. As I was eating a bowl of granola and yogurt, I caught Moe out in the courtyard sitting on a tree stump. He had a length of fishing line attached to a stick. At the other end was a feathery stuffed animal that kept a brown cat entertained with flicks of Moe's wrist.

I had to sit in on a night class and by the time I returned home, there was a new message, but Moe took extra strokes to make it bold this time.

SEEN BLACK KITTEN?

My eyes shot upward toward the trees and traced the intricate roofline. No wonder birds loved it here, and so did the cats. There was a natural balance of things like the ocean. Judging by the way Moe pampered the cats, though, I doubted one would want to run off. I went out to the street to make sure the kitten hadn't been hit by a car. Then I walked around to the front of the house, which didn't leave too many places to hide. There were rusted hooks where a porch swing once hung. Paint was falling away in strips from the ceiling. Two lawn chairs sat empty around a glass table with a coffee can brimming with cigarette butts. When I was signing the lease, the landlord had told me that the house was once owned by a lumber baron who hosted lavish parties in the main room. Big bands and flapper dresses had given way to termites and short-term renters. We were the custodians of its demise with only Moe standing in the way of utter collapse.

I replied to Moe in my now-signature green color.

AM LOOKING

Next morning I saw Moe back on his tree stump wearing a fatherly smile. A black kitten was contorting itself in his lap. I was glad for that.

*

Sage was back at the café and sounding bubbly as ever. Somewhere between my first and second latte, I asked her if she wanted to see a French movie at the independent theater. She broke into a smattering of the language and I took it as a yes.

I picked her up Friday evening from the café. She smelled of a potpourri of those high-quality organic products. We enjoyed the film, although it had the usual bizarre philosophical dialogue, or maybe it was the translations. She said it was a mixture of both. She didn't flinch at nudity in unexpected places. I asked her if she wanted to have tea and croissants at my place.

"It's about time I served you," I said.

She smiled at my corny, premeditated line.

"So, this is your casa," she said as we pulled up. "I've ridden my bike by it who knows how many times. It's funky and stately at the same time."

"That's a good way to describe it."

When we entered the side yard, there was a new message from Moe.

1ST FLOOR VACANT

Interesting. How could those tenants have left so quickly? I remembered hearing the tambourine just the other night. The curtains to the downstairs were open and all that remained was an ashtray on the windowsill in the lesbians' old bedroom.

"Looks like we'll be having a quiet evening," I said.

She reached for her purse. "I want to communicate with Moe."

Sage knew all about him by now. She pulled out a chalk box and reached for a pink piece. With a few strokes she had the makings of a cartoonish cat. She gave it a red tongue and a blue collar.

"I love it. I think Moe will, too," I said.

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But her expression went from delight to fright when I opened the exterior door and showed her the creaky staircase, which now seemed oddly steep. I hadn't thought about it since I'd moved in last year and wrestled with a futon for the better part of an afternoon. Where was Moe or the guy with the tambourine when I needed them? At the top of the steps were doors to two apartments, mine and my neighbor's. He was an undergraduate student, kept odd hours, and rode a rusty cruiser bike. He had disappeared, either temporarily or permanently, on a two-month backpacking trip to New Zealand.

"Is this house haunted?" she asked.

"The rent would only go up if it were," I said. "The landlord would make us pay for extra entertainment."

She didn't laugh. Her eyes were darting around. "Where are you taking me?"

"Just upstairs. Sorry I forgot to replace the light bulb." And that was true. I was too busy cleaning and studying. "Be careful. The carpet is kind of thick."

Before we stepped out from under the last remaining shard of porch light, I reached out and took her freshly moisturized hand. It was the first time that we'd touched, other than a graze or two as she handed me mugs at the café. She looked back at her chalk cat, as if to say goodbye, then up into the blackness. If I could just get her up the stairs, I knew she'd be OK. As we trudged skyward, her grip tightened.

When I opened the front door, I was actually surprised at just how clean it looked. As I was sucking in the so-called eco-friendly chemicals, Sage must have been exhaling and her mood snapped back to the waveless calm I was used to.

"Wow, this is the coolest apartment. It looks like a private reading room at a library."

"That's the look I was going for," I said.

She walked into my bedroom with newfound confidence, bent over, and looked down into the courtyard. It was an unusually dark night, but there was a little light coming from the streetlight. I admired her slender thighs and hips that expanded into an open heart.

"So that's Moe's teepee."

"He's usually in it during the day," I said. "Especially when it's raining."

"I hope I get to meet him."

"We'll see. He a mysterious one."

She rose and the heart closed. "What's his story?"

"It's a tragic one. The landlord told me that he used to be a crab fisherman. His boat collided with a ship in the fog. Moe was the lone survivor of the four."

"Oh, that's terrible."

"I saw him from afar on the beach a few weeks ago. I always take my binoculars."

"I'm sure you do. What'd you see?"

"He hangs out a memorial on top of a point overlooking the accident scene. He built it out of driftwood. It looks like a scaled-down, old-fashioned church with a cross on the roof. I watched him sit beside it and play his guitar."

"He's a sensitive soul."

"I guess. Makes you think differently about seafood, huh?"

"How so?"

"It's a dangerous business," I said. "I think he's got a bad shoulder. I see him working it in circles like a baseball pitcher. He apparently got a decent insurance settlement, but still lives in the basement."

"Poor guy."

I filled the kettle on the stove and had the boxes of tea arranged in advance. I put a plate of croissants in the microwave, ready to get zapped for a few seconds once the kettle started screaming. The Jamaican kitchen was quiet. All I heard was a few creaks in the pipes.

Sage had found a spot on the sofa by the time I came out with the tray. She was flipping through an architecture book.

"I'm kind of fascinated by the Victorian style," I said.

"The character is missing today," she said. She looked up from the page for a moment. Her skin was taut and, like her hands, well hydrated. "I've been admiring your collection of candles."

I took the cue and went for the matches in the kitchen. I lit a green and a white one on the bookcase.

"That's nice," she said. She smirked as she glanced back down at the book. She probably knew the candles had never been lit.

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We talked about the North Coast: redwoods, giant ferns, ocean air. And what we didn't like about it: the lack of sun. She was an Arizona girl, after all. I was from Maryland, and even that seemed like a sunny place compared to this.

I popped on the TV and there was a documentary about early hominids in Africa. I'd been fascinated with evolution ever since I was a kid. I'd seen the show before but pretended like I hadn't. Two minutes into it, she started glancing, or rather, glaring at me. I sensed a storm building.

"They did a good job with the special effects," I said. "What do you think?"

"I think we're done talking."

"We can talk."

"This is kind of nerdy."

"I thought you were into culture."

"What culture? It's just a tribe running around the plains."

"Be patient," I said. "They'll be doing yoga together in another hundred thousand years."

"This is what you do on Friday nights?"

"No, I usually go to the supermarket."

"That's ridiculous. You can do that any day of the week."

"Yeah, but it's empty. Efficient."

"That's a boring thing to do," she said.

"You should appreciate it more. Look how far we had to evolve in order to organize life in a complex manner. You can learn everything you need to know there."

"At a Shop & Go? You're being silly."

"I'll put it another way. We've got islands made of plastic in the ocean. Where do you think it comes from? I like to go where the sinners are."

"It's not my kind of Friday entertainment."

"Are you religious?"

"No, not really. Why do you ask?"

"I thought you might have something against science."

"This is just dry."

"I find it relaxing."

"I'm sure you do."

My ex-wife used to say the same thing. Sage didn't know that I was previously married and, at that point, I wasn't about to give her more ammunition.

After some silence, I said, "I just don't understand people who turn their noses up at learning." I was actually aiming my comment at undergraduate students and their horrendous papers.

"Learning? I learn every day."

"And what do you study?"

"I study people. It's an art, not a science."

"It certainly is," I said.

She laughed, but not in a reassuring way. "You're not a people person. I knew that when I first met you. All huddled in the corner, not saying much, surrounded by fat, boring books."

"Boring? I'm studying things that could change the world."

"Then maybe you need to start caring about people in the next booth."

She had a point there. My rational brain had to admit that. My ex couldn't have said it better.

I turned off the TV and the sound of rain replaced an uninspiring, and perhaps ominous, commercial about erectile dysfunction. She looked at the clock, then at the windows behind us.

"More tea?"

She nodded.

The rain was soon overflowing the gutters. We sat quietly and she pulled her legs up into a cross-legged pose. She looked beyond the TV and straight into the bay window, probably wishing she was anywhere but here. Just when her silence was becoming unbearable for me, she said, "I don't want to go out in that tempest."

"You don't have to."

After she returned from the bathroom, she said, "Looks like my drawing is gone. That's too bad."

"You can draw another one."

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"Not today."

At least she didn't say *never*. "You're mad."

"I don't get mad. I get anxious."

"Why are you anxious?"

"I'm trapped in a haunted house with strangers."

"I'm not a stranger."

She maneuvered like a dolphin on the couch, put her head on a pillow and faked comfort. I pulled a blanket over her and she closed her eyes without saying thanks. I sat pressed up against her feet, unsure what to do next. Was I supposed to cuddle up with her? Stay put? Or eat rat poison? I chose to stay put and let my head nod back.

I snapped forward when she said, "You're doing great things for the planet."

"You think so?"

"But you need to work on your soft skills. Get out of your head from time to time."

Yes, my ex would agree. "Get me a job at the café."

"You're not ready for the big time just yet." She laughed and closed her eyes.

At what must have been two in the morning, we heard a pounding on the double front doors of the downstairs apartment. It echoed through the vacantness and up to my abode, which had always seemed sealed off by being in the back of the house.

"That's one angry knock," she said.

We unfurled ourselves and I went for the bay window as Sage looked out the kitchen. Neither of us could see the front of the house. The rain had turned into a steady mist and I didn't see anything moving in the courtyard. I was about to dismiss the knocking when Sage screeched.

"Oh, God. There's a man standing under the streetlamp. He looks like death."

By the time I made it over to her, he was gone.

"What does death look like?"

"He was really tall and had a shiny black trench coat and this big floppy hat and motorcycle boots."

"Maybe he's homeless and was looking for a place to crash. Word gets around when buildings go vacant in this neighborhood."

"I don't know. He was looking for something. He seemed determined."

At first I thought it was the tambourine/speed freak guy. Maybe he forgot something on his way out. But he didn't look like death. He was short, fat and wore sandals.

"I definitely don't want to go out there," she said.

"You don't have to. Just stay here."

She leaned into me as we both looked at the streetlight.

I went to the bathroom and pulled out an extra toothbrush. "You can thank my dentist for this."

Smelling of the same cinnamon toothpaste, we returned to the couch and she did her dolphin thing again, but this time finding a nice cove between my arm and shoulder.

We dozed off and were awakened by what sounded like a baseball bat destroying aluminum trashcans.

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Cats?"

I looked out the bay window and saw a pair of legs attached to work boots outside the courtyard. The rest of him was hidden beneath a cut of roofline. I started putting on my shoes.

"You're going out there?"

"It's Moe."

"Oh, God," she said when she saw me grab my spare kayak paddle from the corner.

"If I wave this at you, call the police."

I went down the staircase, now cursing myself for forgetting to replace the light bulb. But then I realized that my stupid oversight had protected my night vision, which I was going to need. Not that it alone was good enough to keep me from tripping over a fold in the carpet. I felt myself falling through space. I instinctively reached out with the paddle and wedged it underneath the crack in the exterior door. With a grab of the railing and some sophisticated orbital mechanics, I kept from falling, but the paddle made a weird slap and crunch. Sage stuck her head out the apartment door, and before she could say anything, I reassured her that I was OK. When I heard her shut the door and twist the lock, I was off again.

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There wasn't time for fear, it was overshadowed by a desire to protect Moe. I opened the door and mist crept in. I looked both ways and saw a vacant city street and a shadowy courtyard. With my paddle raised over my shoulder, I walked toward the front yard and, stupidly, into a puddle. The street was quiet. I returned to the side yard and saw Moe. He was on his back with the black kitten sitting by his head. When I approached, the cat scattered and I saw blood coming out of Moe's mouth and nose. I walked out to where Sage could see me and gave her the signal.

She came down and immediately went up to Moe to feel his neck for a pulse.

"He's alive and breathing. Probably just out cold," she said. "That's about all I know from my first-aid training."

I'd never seen Moe up close before. His face was more angular than I expected. His beard was well kept. It reminded me, for some reason, of the first time I saw a dead squirrel when I was a child.

We heard sirens followed by car doors slamming and radio chatter out front. Two police officers approached the courtyard with open holsters and hands on their guns. I put my arm around Sage and she pressed up against my ribs. While one cop walked toward Moe's apartment doors, the other stuck the barrel of his revolver through the teepee door and a fat gray cat dispersed. The police officers looked at each other without humor, then one got on the radio and told the ambulance that the scene had been secured. Two EMTs rushed in with a stretcher, backboard and first-aid kits. They lifted Moe's eyelids and shined a flashlight into his pupils. When Moe came to, he turned to spit out a minor amount of blood. He stared at Sage and I but didn't say anything. Soon they had him on the stretcher. The side of his head was swollen.

I looked into Moe's pulsating eyes. "Don't worry, I'll watch the place," I said.

He reached out with a fist and I bumped mine against his. Lacerations from years of fishing had healed into baby snakes on the back of his hand.

The next thing Sage and I knew we were filling out statements on the hood of a cop car.

Sage was too shaken up to go home and the house must have looked a lot less haunted in daylight. She had to be at the café in a couple of hours anyway. While she was freshening up in the bathroom, the police officer called. He said Moe was being examined for a concussion but was otherwise doing fine.

"Your ex-neighbors helped themselves to other people's heroin when they skipped town," the cop said. "Moe put up a helluva fight defending the place when the dealers were rummaging around."

"There was more than one?"

"Two that he can remember."

"Does he have any family there at the hospital?" I asked.

"There's a woman with dreadlocks. She's his cousin."

So they were related. Before I got off the phone, the officer said the usual cop stuff, to call police if I saw the trench coat man again or anyone else who looked suspicious. That was a little delicate, of course. My whole neighborhood looked suspicious.

I called the nurse's desk at the hospital and told them to let Moe know that I'd be happy to give him a ride home when he was ready, although he obviously had that covered.

*

I stopped by Sage's café to tell her what I'd learned.

"Wow, we'd better put together a care package," she said.

Sage found a wicker basket behind the counter and filled it with exotic tea, coffee, chocolate and pastries. She pulled a gift card from her purse and we both signed it. Sage gave me a peck on the cheek and I was off.

I pushed open the wrought-iron gate and entered the courtyard. I placed the basket by Moe's trap doors. I ran upstairs and grabbed the chalk. I made huge white letters and shadowed them with green. From my bay window, it looked as if my message was rising from the sidewalk in three dimensions.

WELCOME HOME

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Repurposing

The light didn't hit you all at once when you came up, that would have been murder. The tinted glass in the first room, at the top of the shaft, was a mellow green like the inside of an aquarium. Kyle always stayed in there a few minutes before stepping into the outer room where the light was harsher, the windows only lightly grayed, the fluorescents in the ceiling burning around the clock. He pulled on his sunglasses there, took a breath, and stepped out into the broken light filtering down through the hickory and pine and whatever else the woods were made of.

He stood in the little clearing off to the side of the door, waited for the thud of the lock engaging, then dropped his key card into his pocket and climbed on his bike. By the time the path emerged from the trees into full sun, he was ready for it. He tilted his head back and soaked it in.

#

Carlynn called him The Albino, something Lauren half-forgave, coming from what she called the same "narrow background". He was awfully pale, though. When he smiled, or tried to, his teeth were yellow, the stubble on his cheeks sparse and uneven. He was something her father would have scared her with when she was a child, a woods-thing, a night monster. Though he seemed polite enough.

She watched him lock his bike to the crepe myrtle in front of the shop. Nobody around there rode bikes, except for the DUIs, so she didn't know who was going to steal it. He tugged on the chain twice, paused, then yanked it once more. Always the same. Maybe he was OCD. Everybody seemed to be now, any little superstition or habit was all of a sudden a disorder. Those poor ball players—Nate had played all through high school—if anyone looked too closely at them, they'd lock them all up. Rabbit's feet, years-old undershirts. Nate still held onto some of it, she was sure: If I make this light, then everybody will be ok for another year. If three grapes come off the bunch at once, I'll get that job. None of it worked, of course, but who did it hurt either?

When the little bell on the door chimed, she made a point of not looking up. She heard him move past, pausing for a second by the counter before making his way back to the graphic novels and strategy card games.

"Look at him," Carlynn whispered. "Sweating through his skinny-ass waistband."

Well it was hot, hotter than most years—this early, anyway. Global warming, probably. Most people around Breedon didn't believe in it, of course, but that's just because they knew they'd have to change their habits if they did. Lauren believed. She believed in science, and she believed—always had—that people one way or another would end up ruining things. We aren't as bright as we think, she always said (to herself). Just because you can teach somebody to drive a car or work a labeler, it doesn't mean they ought to be put in charge of anybody's destiny.

The heat poured through the windows and leaked under the door. She moved closer to the fan, let it blow through her hair and across her face, drying off the sweat you could mistake for tears if you didn't know better.

#

Kyle flipped through The Sandman, tried to put himself into the story, right there in the panels the way he used to, but it wasn't working. He was afraid he was getting too old for it, for fantasy. Or maybe it was the place—out here in the wilderness of western Kentucky. He still wasn't sure why he'd taken the job.

He didn't care about computers anymore, there was no fascination for him in machines. The solitude was what had appealed to him, the idea of it. Finding some deeper part of himself through

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isolation and contemplation. A kind of digital Thoreau, that's how he'd framed his future self. It had felt good buying the three-pack of Moleskines—the bookstore clerk looked at him like someone consequential, a thinker. But he'd run out of thoughts in less than three pages, and the journals were now leveling the legs of his desk.

He picked up a bag of D&D dice, let them tumble around in his palm. He could go for a game, but he had no friends here, didn't know anybody at all. When he thought about it, he hadn't made any new friends since sometime in junior high. And back then it had just happened. You fell together, like to like.

In the adult world you had to make an effort, and he found it harder and harder to work himself up to the trouble.

"Seven fifty," the girl behind the counter said.

"Okay." He wanted to call her by name, say "thank you Jane", or whatever. That was a step, wasn't it? He looked for a name tag, but realized he was just staring at her breasts—it would look like that anyway. He turned away, felt himself blush. The girl clicked her tongue like a teacher correcting him. Shit.

When he went to unlock his bike, he saw that somebody had stolen the saddle. He had to ride back to the data cave standing up, leaning out over the handlebars. He forgot at one point and nearly skewered himself—an emergency room story the staff would have laughed about for weeks. Who'd steal a goddamn bike saddle? Even here, in this shithole, the prevailing assholes had unfailingly found him.

#

Carlynn came back from lunch laughing and carrying a bicycle seat.

"Boy's gonna get a surprise when he sits down," she said, laughing and waving the seat by its stem. Like it was a trophy of some kind, a slain creature.

"Why would you do that?"

"What? It's funny."

"That's some hospitality. Just think if you were him, in some strange town—"

"Oh, it's strange."

"In some strange town, don't know anybody, and you get treated like that?"

Carlynn shrugged and dropped the seat on the counter.

"You're no fun anymore."

Really, though, what kind of behavior was that, what brand of Southern hospitality did that fall under? And she was too fun. That just wasn't her idea of it.

She lifted the seat off the counter and stowed it underneath with the case of plastic bags and the box of Swiffer pads. Its proximity embarrassed her a little, it seemed very personal. She thought about the way he'd blushed when he was checking her out. She didn't mind, really, it didn't happen all that often anymore. Everyone in town knew everybody else, they'd all grown up together, and there were no more surprises. People didn't even throw surprise birthday parties, they always fell flat. That, she thought, was the perfect town slogan for Breedon: Nothing Surprises Anybody.

He was a scientist of some kind, she'd heard, out at the Kipp Mine. What used to be the Kipp Mine. Which explained his pallor, the general inattention to his appearance—he was working on something important, dedicating himself to a larger goal. In the interests of others, she was sure. Probably measuring the radiation penetrating into the old shafts, the rays chipping away at the earth like an ice pick. Working *on* something, not *for* something (or someone). To solve a problem, to better people's circumstances—not just to get a paycheck and a weekend.

And what was she doing? Selling gewgaws and comic books to redneck teens.

Carlynn offered to lock up, but the last time she had forty dollars disappeared from the till. Lauren had made the difference up herself, told Mr. Hantz it had been misplaced or fell behind the counter. Not again, though. As lousy a job as this was, she wasn't risking losing it to cover for somebody else's klepto tendencies. If Carlynn needed something, she could have come to her, or to Mr. Hantz. Now he suspected her, Lauren, straight as a needle Lauren. He looked at her differently. But that's what good deeds got you.

"I'll take care of it tonight," Lauren said. "You've got plans, right?"

"If I don't, I'll make some."

"Go on then."

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Carlynn was slow getting her things together. She watched Lauren closely as she went about cashing out, running her tongue around inside her mouth like she did when she was thinking deeply. It was not attractive.

"Really," Lauren said. "Go have fun."

"Fun," Carlynn said, snorting. She seemed about to say something else, but then she turned and strolled out the door, her purse swinging at the end of her arm like she was on a boulevard somewhere—in Paris or something—and everybody was watching her. But it was only Lauren watching , and she went right back to counting.

#

Lauren put the bike seat in her bag with the post poking out the top. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with it. The mine wasn't on her way home, but it wasn't completely out of the way either. Maybe she'd cut through the woods like she used to when she'd catch her dad after his shift, timing it so he'd be coming out of the elevator when she got there and she could straddle the bike and shuffle along beside him, kicking up dust nobody noticed, they were already so covered.

Gil Taver, who worked for the utility company, said the place sucked up power now like nobody's business. "Megawatts over everybody." Well, why not? Might as well make use of the place. The coal was long gone, and nobody wanted it anymore anyway. Solar was the thing now, and wind. Coal had never brought anybody anything but black lung and greenhouse gas. And towns like this, holes in the map.

The lights were on at the ball field. She could see little clots of teenagers out around the trees, their cars pulled up on the grass. Friday, the doubter's Sabbath. It didn't mean much to her now, but she still remembered. Drinking and necking under those same trees out along the first base line where she could see shadows moving and hear laughter and swearing. Nate's breath, whiskey-sharp along her skin. She hoped he was doing well now, she really did. But it wasn't likely. People didn't change, that was just a fantasy of little girls and drinkers.

Past where the road turned to gravel and the last of the lights were blocked by the trees, it was darker than she remembered. Of course, there were all those men with lamps on their helmets then—like explorers, bright eyes sweeping across the woods and the burned fringe of weeds. They seemed happy, that's the way she remembered it—a few singing even, high hillbilly voices—but that probably wasn't accurate. It was the end of coal already then, and no one had any illusions left.

"What's to stay for?" Nate had said that last night, leaning against his Camaro. Running a thumb along the little lip under the door handle. Caressing it.

"It'll come back."

"Coal? You're shitting me."

"Not coal, no. Breedon. Something else will come along."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But places don't just die."

"Sure they do, all the time."

"They hibernate, maybe. Fall on hard times, but that's different."

"Where'd you get that?"

"It's history."

"Well, I'm talking about the future, not the past."

He didn't have anything better waiting for him when he drove off, she knew. A cousin somewhere in California, Bakersfield. She'd looked it up online, and it was even worse than Breedon. Dirt and dead grass, and oil pumps like rusted-out dinosaurs raising and dropping their heads, sucking the dry ground even drier.

She'd been right too, it had come back. Part way, at least. Businesses had stopped closing, a few new ones had opened up. There was an organic farm just outside of town now, a craft brewery with stainless steel vats shining in the window. And two coffee shops that sold drinks you'd never know were coffee. Of course, it could be that the rest of the country had just sunk a little lower, and they had only risen in relation. She couldn't be sure, but did it matter?

She turned the last bend and saw cars and people and headlights shining on the mine's scarred-up

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metal doors. Big, bright rings like a Hollywood movie premiere, or a prison escape.

#

Servers were going down right and left. He'd rebooted eight since lunch, when the weekly average was four. He'd called the Data Center, and they'd yelled at him, told him to just fucking fix it. But this was way above his pay grade, he had no idea what to do, and he suspected they didn't either. He hadn't touched anything, it wasn't his fault—which didn't keep him from being a scapegoat. In fact it was probably the perfect scenario for a scapegoat, maybe even the reason they'd hired him and sent him out here.

But that wasn't it. That wasn't why he was crying.

It was his bike, the stolen saddle. How stupid was that? Why should he care? Because it was personal, that's why. It wasn't a random crime, some fucked-up delinquent kid walking home from school. It wasn't a crime of opportunity, it was a hate crime. They hated him. He didn't know why, but they did. It had happened before, in other places, on other jobs. Something in him rubbed people the wrong way. If they got to know him they'd like him, he knew they would, but he wouldn't get the chance.

It had already passed. He was on the outside, and the door had slammed again in his face.

He punched the wall, solid rock that didn't give. He felt his knuckles crunch, the skin peel back. He was howling now, like some kind of head case, or an animal trapped in its den.

Another row of LEDs went red. Then another. Someone's data vaporized as he watched—family photos gone, a brilliant coming-of-age novel shredded into scrambled bits. Information all around him was spiraling out into blackness, like the arms of a galaxy gathering nothingness up in its sweep. Chaos, electronic Alzheimer's, loss and decay.

Then a knock, the void's fist rapping. And another.

He wiped his nose and slunk over to the security console. The camera was the cheapest you could get, and she was pretty blurry, but it was definitely her. The girl from the store.

He pressed the intercom.

"Hello," he said.

She looked around comically.

He pressed the intercom again: "The button by the door."

"Sorry."

"That's ok."

"Look, there's some people out here. They're kind of unruly."

He could see a small crowd behind her haloed by headlights, the silhouettes of beer bottles and mullets and—was that a rifle?

"Why?"

She was yelling something at the crowd, then she turned back, half-smiled up at the camera.

"Sorry. What?"

"Why are they unruly?"

"It's Friday."

"I don't have any money or anything."

"They think you're the government, some secret part of it. Or there's aliens in there. Or something. I'm not too clear on it myself."

A bottle hit the wall beside the camera, spraying liquid across the lens. The girl held her hand up to her forehead, brought it back away and looked at it.

"Are you bleeding?"

He could see her mouth moving, but there was just white noise and a high piercing whine.

He felt the slowness of the ancient elevator's ascent as a physical pain: "Come on come on come on," thumping the heel of his hand against the panel. Rising up through the darkness to—what? A mob of shadows shuffling through a fog of dust and truck headlights.

"EVERYBODY CHILL THE FUCK OUT!" he yelled, emerging into the relative glare.

A shadow or two paused to look at him, somebody laughed and was shushed.

"Ok," a guy said—twenty something in a Skrillex T-shirt and cargo pants. "Will do."

Off to the side, the girl sat on a blanket with a sterile pad pressed against her head.

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"Are there aliens in there?" somebody in the back asked.

"What?"

"In the mine."

"No, it's computers. Servers."

"Oh shit, really?" Skrillex said.

"Yes."

"Okay, makes sense. Nice and cool in there, wide open."

"Right."

Skrillex leaned down toward the girl, looked at her closely.

"You feeling all right? No concussion symptoms or anything?"

She shook her head.

"Really sorry about that, Lauren. It was Cliff, he's an idiot. But you know that."

"Everybody knows that," somebody said. "Even Cliff."

"Fuckin'-a," somebody else—presumably Cliff—said.

He could feel his knees shaking. If he talked now, his voice would come out thin and warbly, scared sounding. So he just nodded and squatted down beside the girl on the blanket. People were already moving off, cars backing out. Soon it was just the three of them.

"Underground, and they call it the cloud," Skrillex said finally.

"I know."

"Around here, man, it figures."

He produced a bottle of Jack Daniels from somewhere and set it on the blanket.

"Look, y'all take this, okay? And no hard feelings. Really, we've got nothing against the cloud."

"Or you either," somebody else said, a girl back in the shadows he couldn't see.

"Right, or you either."

Lauren—that was her name, he knew that much now—sat up on the blanket and squinted into the darkness.

"Was this your idea, Carlynn?'

No answer, just the sound of feet shuffling across gravel.

"You should be ashamed!"

Skrillex nodded in commiseration, then strolled back to his car. They could hear the girl giggle as she climbed in beside him and they drove off.

Lauren reached into her purse and pulled something out. She was so close he could almost touch her.

"I brought your seat," she said. He didn't correct her, tell her it was actually a saddle. Not too long ago, he would have.

He took her with him down a branch tunnel while he rebooted six more servers that had crashed. He waited for the sky to fall, for red lights to flare up and down the mine, staring him down before pouncing.

But that was it, the end of the emergency. Everything went green after that and stayed green. He had no idea what the glitch had been—an act of god, sun spots, voodoo.

"You live down here?" she asked. His cot and his little bookshelf were wedged against the wall under an old vent pipe. It looked like a dungeon, he could see that.

"Pretty much. If you call it living."

"What do you call it?"

They spread the blanket out on the floor. He could feel the heat off the processors washing over them, the whiskey firing through his brain. There were pockets of safety in the world, he was beginning to believe, cozy little corners amid the melee.

#

She'd be fired first thing Monday. She knew it as surely as if it had already happened. Mr. Hantz would see the pictures, maybe on Carlynn's phone—Lauren with her head bleeding, yelling and waving a bottle. He'd hear about the scuffle from his police friends. By tomorrow it would be a riot, and he wouldn't want any part of it. Lauren couldn't imagine who else he'd get to work in the crummy little store, but that was his problem. She was safe in the mine for now. Safe and sound in a hole in the ground,

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as her father used to say.

The boy leaned in toward her, knocked the whiskey over.

"Sorry," he said.

"Hold on," she said, righting the bottle.

"I'm sorry. I'm not too good at this."

She took another sip, scrunched up her face.

"Nobody is."

No one she'd ever known, at least. Maybe her mother and her father had had the knack once, that mutual feeling, but that was a long time ago—and as far as she knew she'd spoiled it. It was just her and her dad for most of her life, then he'd died in the mine…could anyone blame her for having her doubts?

The boy was looking at her in a way she recognized. He took a big slug of the whiskey, choked a little on it. He was so awkward that a twinge of something like mercy shivered through her.

"I was with this one guy for a while," she said. "We almost got married." Another disaster, but without all the dust and frenzy. Just a steady drift away from each other that always made her think of icebergs—clumsy and slow and inevitable. "But it's more than that, isn't it? A relationship."

"I don't know."

"No," she agreed. "Me neither."

She lay back on the rock floor. The cave ceiling arched out of sight overhead; above that was everyone and everything else. After a little while he moved closer, rolled half onto her and started kissing the side of her head. His chin poked into her neck. The floor was uneven, and he was heavy on top of her, not as light as he looked. All sharp points, hip bones and knees. Along the walls little green lights glowed, cycling on and off like animals' eyes. She squinted, let them dissolve into vague, amorphous blobs and thought: What if it *was* just us left? All alone down here, everything up above blown up or melted or dried out. No Carlynn, no Nate, no Mr. Hantz. Just me and—she didn't even know his name. The Albino, but she couldn't very well call him that. She'd have to ask him later. He was busy now, breathing hard.

When you thought about it, it had already happened on a small scale, and more than once. Oblivion. To her and to everybody. Little armageddons when people moved away or died, your world skewed off a little. Towns went under, like this one, and if they came back it was never the same.

She closed her eyes, felt herself spinning. She hoped this wasn't the end, or some new beginning. Fumbling around in a cave with the names and addresses of all the people lost in whatever disaster floating through the air above them. She saw the ghost of her father marching hand-in-hand with the other dead miners in a long line down toward the chiseled-out face, past rows of machines humming and whirring. Right through the rock, jagged and ancient, waiting for its next incarnation.

She kicked her foot against a plastic bin: "REDUCE, REUSE". She giggled, and he stopped for a second. She stifled herself, and he started up again. She whispered a name, even though it was just a guess and couldn't possibly have been his.

"Henry."

Some familiarity was called for, after all. Some attempt, however clumsy, at picking up the thread.

He looked at her.

"I'm Kyle."

"Kyle?"

"Yeah."

"Ok."

She pulled his head down onto her shoulder.

"Who's Henry?"

"Nobody."

His breath was warm against her collarbone, coming in ragged bursts, all the tension and thrill gone suddenly out of him. He might have been crying, she wasn't sure; she hugged him as best she could. How was she supposed to tell him about the guy she'd seen in her mind a thousand times, walking toward her with a hand raised and a big smile, opening his mouth to ask where she'd been all his life?

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Life in Big Circle

It was in the community center down on Elysian Fields where they had their meetings. They were funded by a Methodist group that could always be seen on college campuses giving hugs and handing out Gospel tracts. Big Circle was the name of their rehab program for young adults, with a name that wouldn't threaten older addicts, people that never got their shit together. Kaufman guessed they thought *Big Circle* sounded less intimidating than some other programs, especially ones that required residency. If it wasn't ordered by his probation officer, Kaufman wouldn't be coming.

Kaufman entered and moved to the table holding poppy seed bagels and a Mr. Coffee machine. There was a woman handing out nametags, the ones which start with "Hello My Name Is". Kaufman's PO said he didn't need to give them his first name if he didn't want. That was one of the perks of Big Circle, nobody got too friendly: no residency, no house visits, minimal conversation in relation to N.A.

"Kaufman," he said. The woman wore a nametag that read, "Lisa"; she wrote in elaborate cursive, as if her penmanship would earn her a spot on the 12-step honor roll.

Kaufman could tell through her thin green sweater that Lisa had nice tits, and her lips were glossed in hot pink, the kind cheerleaders would wear when they were about to perform fellatio. But Lisa had dark bags under her eyes, and was convinced she was in her twenties when she was probably pushing forty. She gave him a look that read, *No first name?* Yeah, you coked-up slut, no first name. Of course he didn't say this, he just smiled and waited. She handed him the nametag.

Kaufman was wearing a button-up polo that he had just cleaned, and he had a pressed pair of slacks on. He watched as all the women noticed him, and he scanned the room to check their appearance. The women here wore knee-long skirts to complement their born-again smiles, and Kaufman knew he'd have to play the prodigal son to get any form of attention from them. Kaufman knew how to talk to women, how it's more important who you *appear* to be than who you actually *are*. Be whatever the girl wants you to be. The other guys in the room looked like a group of strung-out toddlers. They looked at Kaufman, and he knew what they were thinking: *What's this man doing here?* At least he knew he didn't *look* 34.

There were potted plants in the corner of the room that were ambiguously either real or plastic. They looked too green to be real, like something out of the centerfold of an on-flight magazine; however, they appeared to have been watered recently—possibly the result of an inexperienced volunteer. There was an old CD player in the corner that played worship songs of the 1990's, but only the instrumentals.

Kaufman's mom would play the same songs in her home whenever she felt sad or upset, a feeling he usually was the result of. She was prone to yell at him right after he'd shoot up—he would lay flat on the living room shag and make fists with his bare toes. She never liked the music he'd play, the secular garbage of the outside world. Kaufman unwillingly memorized most of her Jesus tunes, and he wondered how much of his mind was dedicated to occupying such space.

More people entered through the door. Everyone looked so young, bodies clad with piercings and colored hair. He wondered if anyone would know he was past thirty. He saw a girl across from him wearing a nametag with jagged capital letters that wrote "PATRICE". Lisa didn't give her this, so she must have saved it from her previous meeting. Some people are forced to go to Big Circle several times a week; that's usually determined by some judge with a vendetta. Patrice had mousey hair and shitty make

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up, as if the color blue exploded across her eyelids and dark maroon oozed out of her cheeks. She had the look of an ex-girlfriend he couldn't remember, but she was too young for his taste. She had the jagged bottom teeth that accompanied methamphetamine addiction, and she would curve her lower lip over to prevent others from seeing. Her clothes made her look older, but she must have been in her early twenties. *Must've started in high school*, he thought. It's not every day you see a teenager hitting the crank pipe.

"How's it going, Patrice?" Lisa said. The two hugged in an awkward moment over the table, both bodies leaning past the point of comfort. Lisa's breasts nearly popped out of her sweater, and Kaufman went took a knee to catch a glance.

"I'm fine, just fine," Patrice said. "Still feeling a little sick from the other day, but it's picking up."

"Well, we're glad you could stop by for the…*meeting*." Lisa wore her toothy grin of artificial optimism, as if bragging she still had her lower molars.

As the group's name suggested, the chair configuration was no surprise. Patrice was the first to speak once the meeting started. She talked about how her low point as of recently was when she asked her son to buy her cough syrup for her. Even though he's a kid, she told him to use the self check-out line.

"When you start, your stomach starts to feel icky, like you might need to vomit. The drowsy night-time stuff is the stuff that really works, and when you mix it with Diet Coke it makes the ice cubes look green."

Kaufman knew it was the dextromethorphan that you can buy over the counter, but especially the prescription ones that come with codeine.

"So why did you do it?" said Jeff, the group leader. He wore a mustard yellow button-up that he thought made him look official, but he looked like a character on some shitty sitcom.

Patrice looked down. "I guess I figured it was better than the crank I was using"— Crank is a term for methamphetamine that died out in the late nineties. Kaufman thought that was really too bad, as *crank addict* sounds far more acceptable in a social context than *meth head*. A Gen X'er must have introduced her to the drug, maybe a parent. "And I really did have the flu, that wasn't bullshit."

Jeff met her eyes. "And how did it make you feel?"

Patrice sighed. "Every time you breathe in, you got that minty feeling in the back of your throat, like you just brushed your teeth. Then it feels like an ice cube is melting inside you and dripping down your ribs. Then after the cold feelings comes the warmth and the lightheadedness. And you feel dizzy if you stand up too quickly. And the muscles in your back start tingling when you're coming down, just like they were when you were going up. And your scalp feels moist when you run your fingers through your hair."

"I meant, how did you *feel* doing drugs in the same home as your son?" Jeff stroked his chin, as if signalling to the group that he was pondering something.

"Oh," Patrice said, "you know, lousy."

The guy to Kaufman's right suffered from a borderline denim fixation, and he always said '*asshole this, shithole that, fuck-o'* till the Methodists who provided the snacks had a word with him. When he was in high school, Kaufman had a tendency to end all his sentences with "shit", a habit his mother was quick to criticize. But now he knew how to talk to anybody; that's how he got anywhere in life, that's how he convinced his P.O. to let him come to Big Circle instead of N.A.

"And, uh, yeah, that's how I started doing coke. That's how my life went straight in the shithole."

This guy's voice made Kaufman's eyes turn back in their sockets. He did coke every now and then, but he never knew the real depths of addiction. Kaufman remembered the first time he snorted. It was in high school, and the girl he was banging handed him a rolled-up dollar bill. She cut her stuff in half lines over their senior yearbook. He did it in such small amounts; he remembered not even feeling it after his first line. With his second line he felt how wet it was in his nose, and he experienced the drip in the back of his throat. His eyes opened wide and the room was alive. It was like waking up in the middle of the

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night to fresh black Folger's. Yet it was an overrated drug: it's quantity over quality, that's for sure. It was nothing like snorting *O*.

The chairs everyone was sitting in had this cold metallic feel that Kaufman didn't enjoy. When one would curve their fingers under, it was like checking the pulse of someone who'd OD'd. Kaufman decided not to speak on this day. They didn't make you speak on your first day; his Probation Officer told him that. Kaufman had to come again the following week, though, so he would have to come up with a story that would leave these Methodists reaching for the Kleenex. It's hard to make people cry in a 12-step, but if you do, they automatically assume you've learned the error of your ways.

After the meeting, everyone sort of gathered by the sandwich table. Lisa and Jeff were praying over the *shithole* guy. Kaufman walked up to Patrice. He liked the way she poised herself, palm stretched behind her neck, back straight, hips out. "Let me guess: court-mandated?" he said.

She laughed. "Court-mandated, indeed." She held her hand out and he shook. Her grip was firm, and it surprised him. It was exclaimed confidence, something he hadn't seen in her before. He invited her outside for a cigarette.

"They can't steal *that* from us," he said. They exchanged pleasantries on the front steps. It was private property, but nobody cared enough to stop them from lighting up. He asked her all about her life, all about her family. He was smooth, and she liked talking to an older man, he could tell. Not that he was old. There was a bar across the street, and they had some drinks; it wasn't like they were just getting out of AA or something. This was allowed. They got a booth together and sat on the same side.

She showed him a tattoo on the lower part of her back. It was P.A.B. in dark red, her initials, but Kaufman didn't think to ask what they each stood for. "They're my scarlet letters," she giggled. "Tramp stamp!" he said. She leaned in close and cushioned herself on his arm.

"I have some *O*," he said. "But we can't do it here. It's hidden in a rather…*secure* place."

"Is that right?" Patrice said. She *was* young. Kaufman was worried she would be unfamiliar with the abbreviation, but she'd clearly been around the narcotic block. He himself had never heard the term till his friend overdosed in the backseat of his Toyota Corolla. Kaufman kept asking him what he'd taken, and all he could respond with was a long "oh" sound. Kaufman had no idea what he was saying at the time.

"How enticing…" Patrice smiled again, this time showing her crank-damaged teeth and displaying her true beauty. Kaufman saw she wasn't like the phonies back at the meeting. She was real in that moment, someone worth his time. He asked her where she lived. She walked to Big Circle, so it must have been close.

"Just a few blocks up. I don't have a car, but we can walk if you like." It wasn't ideal, but it would do. She had one of those fancy apartments next to the university, with a pool out front by the parking lot.

"That's good," Kaufman said, "kids like pools."

Patrice's son was at her dad's place, she said, so if Kaufman liked they could go inside and listen to records. She knew it was a cliché of her generation to buy shit from previous generations, but at least she had good taste. Once in the living room, they took a seat on the ground in front of her music collection. Patrice had every great album that ever existed, Kaufman thought, ranging from *Lola Versus Powerman and the Moneyground, Part One* to *Strangeways, Here We Come*. Kaufman was actually quite surprised she didn't sell most of her collection to pay for methamphetamine, or at least for food. One unfortunate factor was that her apartment smelled of endless tobacco, and ashtrays were scattered across several surfaces. Kaufman felt her breathing on his neck from behind, and he wondered how he smelled to her. He thought she smelled of Teen Spirit deodorant, but that was discontinued in the late nineties.

"Have you ever listened to *The Wall* while watching *2001*? That's some trippy shit my brother showed me in high school; it was amazing," she said. Kaufman was too busy looking through her collection to properly listen to anybody right now.

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"Yeah, that sounds great," he said, not paying attention to the words that left his lips.

"Can I ask you something?" she said, sitting on a couch that, for whatever reason, she kept the plastic covers on. There was a book under one of the front legs, apparently being used to balance the piece of furniture. "What's up?" asked Kaufman, only now paying attention and turning his head toward her.

"How old are you?"

Kaufman put down the music and sat on the couch next to her.

"Not old enough to be your daddy," he said. He went to kiss her but she turned, and he landed on her cheek. "Let's put something on," she said.

Patrice set the *White Album* on her turntable, and they moved to the bathroom. Kaufman took out the bag of *O* he had in his side pocket.

"I only carry around small baggies," he said. "Small enough to fit up your ass; most nobody wants to look up there." Kaufman knew this information wouldn't gross out anyone who's been through a 12-step; they've seen all you can see.

Following his relapse, Kaufman's P.O. ordered a routine search of his home. The cops came with a search warrant, and while his mom was at the front door signing, Kaufman took the opportunity to store his last bag of *O*. This was yesterday; he hasn't been home since. He handed Patrice the baggy, then laid prostrate in her tub. He liked lying flat when taking *O*; it was how the body was meant to receive it. Her bathroom had chipped tiles that formed a broken wall, like someone's head had bashed in. The place carried the odor of stale urine, and he could see the stains hardened on the toilet seat. Kaufman stared at this while he pricked the tub's faucet with his toe. The water was rusty, brown and oozing softly.

"Where did you get the money for your music collection?"

"They're Sean's dad's. I told him I didn't have it." Sean must be her kid, Kaufman thought. Patrice smirked as she cut half-lines on her sink, just like Kaufman's old high school girlfriend. Kaufman always thought cutting half-lines took too much effort.

Kaufman could barely hear the music from the other room, so he told Patrice to open the door.

"Hey, did you know the *White Album* is not actually titled the *White Album*?" he said. He immediately regretted asking this; of course she knew.

"Did you know this song's about love and all that shit?" she said, cutting the lines of O on her sink. What song was she referring to? All Kaufman heard was static, like from an old tv. He asked her to speak up.

"Hey, it's good we're not shooting up. My P.O. always has a way of spotting any needle mark on my arm," Kaufman said, as he lifted himself out of the tub feet first.

"I've never shot up," Patrice said, though it was difficult to hear her as she blew her nose into her bare hand, clearing her nasal passages. The turntable played much smoother after their first line. The *O* itself carried its trademark, an aroma of fresh tulips and the kind of incense one can buy from a head shop. Beauty stores could market this fragrance as a designer perfume and every bottle would sell within a month. The taste was an entirely different, however: tangy, bitter, rotten—the reason people don't drink perfume, and the reason Kaufman snorted *O*.

Everything slowed, including the music. Kaufman told Patrice to lie in the tub if she ever felt sick.

"Jesus Christ, I'm not taking my clothes off," she said, rubbing her index finger over some *O* and spreading it over her gums. He told her that's not what he meant.

"No, no, your breathing…" The sound of the music was grainy, and it lost all melody. Everything he heard was the cacophony of unsynchronized vocals and instrumentals. Nothing felt at place to him. He needed to finish telling Patrice something.

"You don't need to take your clothes off," he said. It was for the breathing.

The half lines went away sooner than Kaufman anticipated. This girl knew what she was doing; she knew what she was about in life. He needed to figure that shit out. He had no idea how to do *O* when it

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was first introduced to him. He remembered not adjusting well to the body's lowered breathing. He learned to pace himself differently from when he did coke; he needed his body to catch up. It's important not to rush, that's what he needed to remember. Lay down in the tub if you need, he thought.

Patrice looked at Kaufman, but seemed to notice him for the very first time.

"I like you," she said. He liked her too. She was just like him, so young and ready for life. Kaufman knew the feeling he had now. He was clean; this was how he was supposed to feel. This was what sober should be, and Patrice and he knew it. She was real; he was real. They knew what they were doing; they were adults making adult decisions. She was so *pretty*, like a painting or some shit, he thought. He couldn't see her anymore. She must have left the room. The *O* was gone, but he hadn't done that many lines. The water handles on the sink were smeared red, probably from the rusty water, Kaufman thought.

Kaufman saw the body on the floor, but couldn't seem to identify who it was. They had the face of an ex-girlfriend he couldn't seem to remember, but the face was covered in blood—dark blood, crusty, cracking. He tried to lift the body into the tub, but he wasn't strong enough. The dark maroon circled around the head, and Kaufman stood back. The song kept playing, it wouldn't end. With palms locked over Kaufman's ears, he could only listen to the endless ringing. Kaufman wondered what time it was. Kaufman wondered when Patrice would come back. Kaufman wondered when her son would be home.

Shit.

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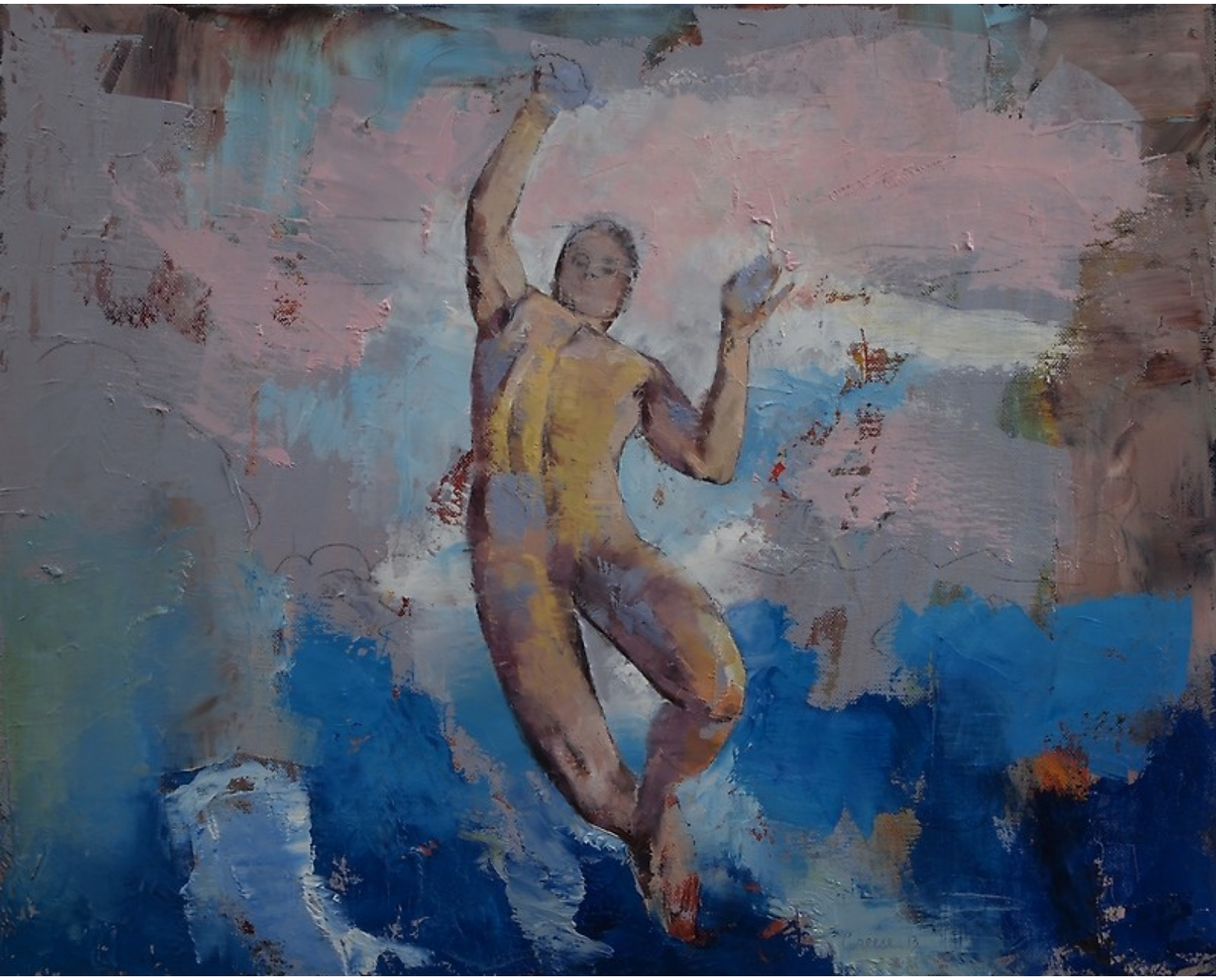

Non-Fiction

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Body Glitter

My feet on either side of the faucet— conditioner and Joel's shampoo on the left, my shampoo and bubble bath on the right; my feet are zebraed from wearing Birkenstocks all summer. Red toe nail polish peels.

Shaving cream foams into my palm, and I glide it smoothly along legs, ankles to thighs around the back corners and knees. I pull the razor along smooth surfaces. Holding my leg above water like a baby in the bow of my arm, I realize how tenderly I care for my body. The scar on my stomach that proved I didn't have stage four cancer stares back at me. *Care for me* my body begs, *while I last*. I ensure that I shave every hair around bony ankles and above veiny feet. I feel for any fuzzies along the way with my left hand and guide the razor- ready right hand.

Discolored skin, finger length and cashew shaped, from a sidewalk scrape reds on my knee, and not far from this, my scar from melanoma sits. The scar starts at the side of the right knee, traces straight back in two directions and straight down. People have told me it looks like the letter P or a question mark. It had 58 stitches for ten days after surgery then steri strips held my mending skin together. My razor hesitates, this pink puckered skin drier in water. A few long hairs emerge from the scar which I refuse to shave. I still fear hurting it somehow. The apple-sized chunk of skin removed and opened for 24 hours.

The first surgeon was supposed to close it, but he couldn't. A second day of surgery and the plastic surgeon to closed the wound; he pivoted skin, fashioned a permanent Band-aid. Shaving around the scar now, I remember the first time I shaved my legs post-surgery.

My fiancé Joel came to my parents' house where I was staying until we got married, and I told him the two things on our agenda: washing my hair and shaving my legs. The freshly moved skin couldn't shower yet, so my body could only get cleaned in sections. I leaned over the kitchen sink, bending the stitched leg up slightly. Standing on my left leg, I was a flamingo in the kitchen, greasy hair and hairy legs wobbling on crutches.

My fiancé gathered a towel, shampoo and conditioner and waited for the water to reach the perfect temperature. The nozzle detached from the sink, so he could run it from the base of my head to the tips of my hair. I remember the way he massaged my scalp, swirling shampoo into the roots, ten fingers at a time. I remember how he grabbed the towel and gently patted the hair, ringing it into a bundle. I felt cleaner and it felt less obvious that I was recovering from surgery. Like a simple washing of the hair can make one stronger, like when Samson's strength lay in his hair. I was vulnerable and greasy, eyes tired from pain meds, body tired from just sitting around healing. The wash restored my strength.

Next, Joel helped me shave my legs. I sat on the lidded toilet in my parents' bathroom. I steamed the little bathroom so my legs wouldn't be covered in goosebumps, prickly and impossible to shave over without a knick. Joel helped me slather on shaving cream, an even coat. I hyperventilated. Black stitches stared back at me. All I could picture was nicking one of them, nicking new skin trying to piece itself together, like me. I feared stitches unthreading, like when I snipped the wrong string when cross stitching and the whole image unraveled. I was afraid I would come undone too. More undone than I already had. I would hyperventilate more, crawl into myself, fear a dog running toward me, my leg vulnerable, fear eyes looking at shifted skin, myself vulnerable. I was afraid of my own sewn skin; my brother said I looked like Frankenstein's creature. I wanted to be beautiful, not ugly, scary and vulnerable. I wrung my hands.

Tears filled my eyes. *I can't do this. I can't do this.* I repeated to him. He was so calm. He said, "You don't have to be scared. You just have to be careful."

He placed his hand over an inch from the bottom of the scar. Just shave up to here, he encouraged.

The blade in my hand this time. The power in my fingertips. The possibility for error all on me. He helped me get as close as I wanted to the injury (I did not get close). And he trickled water over sticky

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shaving- creamed skin, scattered with small black hairs and patted my legs dry.

For a couple of years after that, I steered my razor clear of the scar. My best friend, noticing the little hairs along the edges and the inside of the upper P said she could help me if I was too scared to do it myself. She could shave me, pull a razor along numb textured skin. But long after it healed, I still pictured black stitches staring back at me, threatening to unravel me.

I can usually avoid these memories, but the exposed etched changes in the bathtub tell their origin stories themselves. Yet baths also have a certain cleansing power. Perhaps that's why Jesus taught his disciples to baptize others. The water cleanses, refreshes, heals.

Sometimes when I shave near that scar, I fear another phone call "We found melanoma, let's talk treatment options" and I fear another surgery, another patch of puckered skin begging for lotion, vitamin E, attention. In the morning after I have cleaned my glasses and I'm about to leave the door, this scar pulls at my leg like a child, remember me. Lotion please. It forces me to pull up the pant leg or unbuckle the belt, slather lotion on palms, stick my right hand to my right leg and drag a circle around the scar's edges.

I shave beyond the knees and take gentle care on the thighs. I wish they were more toned, like the girls in magazines. The girls who are younger than me. The only thing that makes me feel aged at 25 is my naked thighs. It's the cellulite. The evidence I never go to the gym. But they're the only legs I have, so

I pull the razor close, dip it in the waiting water. And the close shave scrape continues quickly on the other leg. Sometimes I forget which leg holds my scar and pause on the left one, like at a yield sign, make sure it's safe and pull the razor through. I lap water over shaven legs, feel each smooth inch to make sure I didn't miss a patch, and I lean back against the backside of the tub. The tile cool for a second.

I breathe. That feels better.

The faucet drips a steady rhythm of water. My stomach scar still stares at me. An elongated T, the top line just beneath belly button and then a straight line three inches down. I used to tell people it was five inches long, but then I held a ruler to my stomach, measured exactly three inches of scar. It was a bitch to recover from. Even alone, the protruding stomach makes me self-conscious, so I pull it into myself, and the scar whitens. But who do I have to impress in here? So, I let it back out, thankful for all the food in my fridge and French toast for dinner.

I got this scar from a second melanoma scare. Doctors saw enlarged lymph nodes in my abdomen, and I entered the operating theatre to learn if they were full of stage four melanoma. They were not. This scar symbolizes relief to me, a second chance at life of sorts. It also symbolizes fear. So much fear in those days waiting for answers and questioning how much future I had left. Looking at this scar, all I can think of is cancer and the landscape it has etched in our lives. I soap all of my body parts carefully, thankful for each one. Afraid of what's to come. What new scars may stare at me in a few years, decades.

I hope it's decades.

The scar on my stomach reminds me of my close friend who mourns the anniversary of her mother's death from cancer cells malignant and dividing. Cancer strips us of our family members. It strikes fear in each of our hearts. A lump. The cascade of medical intervention. The other night I laid in bed watching a cancer fundraising show hosted by so many celebrities who have been affected by cancer.

A woman who lost her husband when she had two young sons. A woman who has lost her grandmother, mother to breast cancer. A student who, as a young child thought he might die, now completely cancer free. And while my scar has been sewn up, laid to rest, healed, I still live in a world dominated by cancer. And I am still afraid. The closed skin opened me up to fear of my own body. After watching that program, I didn't want to fall asleep alone. I kept asking Joel, when are you coming to bed?

But he was writing a computer program, so I watched a few episodes of *Homeland* which distracted me enough. The threat of terrorism much less real than cancer. I asked him again; he was agitated, wanted to keep working and tears gathered in my eyes. "I just don't want to go to sleep without you tonight" and he complied, holding me tight.

I pour more bubble bath in the water. Pull the hot water knob and watch the bubbles foam and spread. I squish them between fingers. I cannot just see my own experience in this stomach scar. The horrors of cancer beyond what I lived dictate how I read that scar. I can read a relief, for now. I try to only read relief, a chance at life without cancer treatment. A chance at healthy. But Linda Pastan writes "The body . . . wakens from the dream of health/ again and again." For now, I try to live peacefully in this dream. I notice the smallest intricacies in my hands, the wrinkles on each finger. Earlier, I made hot chocolate on the stove with real chocolate chips and sugar and milk because what's the point of anything

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less?

I stare at the scar now. I don't like to touch it with fingertips. Too easy to feel imperfections, feel needlessly self-conscious. It's pink, and when I relax it's a 3D line, mountain range along the surrounding smooth skin. When I suck in, it puckers like crinkled paper stuffed into gift bags. After my surgery, I remember calling the friend who lost her mom. I had a few weeks to heal, my only job. My brain fuzzy. I sat on my living room floor, put her on speaker phone, and told her I was scared to strip the bandage off.

Scared of my own skin, marred forever. She said that she understood and that it would be okay. She distracted me from myself until slowly as we talked about anything else, I peeked below the bandage, hyperventilating, telling her I didn't know if it would be okay. Some pieces didn't look connected. I might need some steri strips, but I couldn't do it myself. I knew I couldn't. So, my mom, a nurse and my forever wonder woman, came by later, sealed the pieces that weren't too sure about sealing. When it was stuck together, I could cover up my stomach and breathe. And breathe. I could adjust to my changed body tomorrow. Or the next day.

I can feel my hair slouching in its ponytail holder, slouching like me in this bathtub. I adjust the elastic and then let my arms drop back under the warm water, turn the hot water off and pull the heat over my legs to my back to spread the wealth, mixing the water. I have never felt more loved than when I was healing from these surgeries. Joel shampooing my hair and patting my legs dry. My mom helping me shower when I could, the way she would bring over food and flowers for me, anything to make a healing day better. I pour a bit more lavender bubble bath, watch the foam and cover the scars with bubbles, hope

I can forget about them. But not the love I felt when recovering from each surgery. My brother did my dishes for me, let me cry from being lonely. He helped me slide on leggings because my abs wouldn't allow me to bend down. He slid my feet into boots and took me to the doctor for a post-op appointment. My dad stayed home from work to just be with me when I couldn't walk to the bathroom. My vulnerabilities eclipsed by all their love.

I spread bubbles up and down the length of my arms, notice the speckled moles. Some dark and small, the tip of a needle, some larger and lighter. I wrote a poem called "First Dermatology Trip" and at the end called my moles "the body's glitter." I suppose it's all glitter in a way, even the scars. Natural glitter— the moles, unnatural— the scars— markers that can't be manufactured but add a certain beauty and individuality to my body's landscape. Trees on the prairie. Islands in the ocean. I stare at the moles that worry me, pull them close enough to focus on, zoom in on. And I pray they haven't changed. Pray they won't. My dermatologist's cold, sanitized hands pull apart fingers and toes, examine me like an ancient painting, checking each detail for imperfection.

I close my eyes and try to shake off the weight of this world, try to float in this tiny space, imagine it's a raft on a calm lake. Feel the warmth enclose me. Let the water do what water does best. Allow everything else to drain with dirty water.

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Maggie Smith is the author of *Lamp of the Body, The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison,*and *Good Bones,* named by the *Washington Post* as one of the Five Best Poetry Books of 2017. The title poem, "Good Bones," was called the "Official Poem of 2016" by Public Radio International and has been translated into nearly a dozen languages. Her poems have appeared in the *New York Times, Tin House, The Believer, The Paris Review, Kenyon Review, Best American Poetry,* and on the CBS primetime drama *Madam Secretary.* This year she is a Pushcart Prize recipient for her poem, *Parachute,* from her collection *Good Bones.*

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Jack Warren's work has appeared in the anthology *Fifty Best new British and Irish Poets 2018* from Eyewear Books and in 2017 his poem 'Coastline' was awarded first place in the Prague international Microfestival. He has lived in Greece & the Czech Republic and currently resides in York.

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Gad Kaynar-Kissinger
Gad Kaynar-Kissinger (70) is a retired Associate Professor from the Theater Department at Tel Aviv University. His poetry was published in major Israeli literary periodicals and supplements, and compiled in seven books, including a bi-lingual Hebrew-Spanish publication *Lo que queda* (What Remains). For ADHD he won "*The General Israeli Writers' Union*" Award (2010). Kaynar is a stage, TV and film actor, and translator of 70 plays from English, German, Norwegian and Swedish. For his Ibsen translations he was designated in 2009 by the Norwegian King as "Knight First Class of the Royal Norwegian Order of Merit."

Octavio Gonzalez
Octavio Gonzalez's publications include a chapbook, *The Book of Ours* (Momotombo Press, 2009), and poems in various journals and anothologies, including *Puerto del Sol; MiPoesias; La Casita Grande*; and two editions of *La Guagua*, a bilingual anthology (Loom Press, 2017, 2018). When he is not writing poetry, he does research and teaches Modernism and queer literature at Wellesley College.

Bailey Merlin
A great lover of stories, badly behaved dogs, and semi-decent whiskey, Bailey Merlin is a recent MFA graduate from Butler University. Her work has been published by *Dime Show Review*, *lipstick mag*, and *The Avalon Review*. She struggles to finish the same story she has been working on for the last ten years and enjoys complaining about the fact to anyone who will listen. Her blog and poems can be found at baileymerlin.com

Lillian King
Lillian King is a senior at Bowling Green State University studying creative writing with an interest in history. She has been previously published in The Copperfield Review and Collision Magazine, among others. Most importantly, her favorite president is John Quincy Adams.

Andrea McLoughlin
Andrea McLoughlin's short story *Nobody Likes A Blue Girl* in this issue was a runner up for *Glimmer Train's* New Writer Award and the Raymond Carver Prize. Andrea holds a BA in English from UCLA and an MFA from Columbia University. These days, she's a Los Angeles based psychotherapist specialized in addiction. She works in rehab, and most of her stories are rooted in the psychology of relationship.

Eve Elizabeth Taft
Eve Elizabeth Taft is an emerging writer who lives in Minneapolis. She loves the beat poets, the modernists, and anyone who pushes boundaries, a little or a lot.

Rachel Heimowitz
Rachel Heimowitz is the author of the chapbook, *What the Light Reveals* (Tebot Bach Press, 2014.) Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Crab Orchard Review, Spillway, Prairie Schooner* and *Georgia Review*. She was recently a finalist for the COR Richard Peterson Prize, winner of the Passenger Prize and she has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize. Rachel received her MFA from Pacific University in Spring 2015. www.rachelheimowitz.com.

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Grace Gilbert
Grace is currently studying Creative Writing at SUNY Geneseo. She is most excited about vegan Crockpot dishes, anything ever touched by Jorie Graham, and Elton John's newly announced farewell tour (which she would sell both kidneys to attend). Her poetry and creative nonfiction have been recently published in *Gandy Dancer, Glass Mountain Magazine*, and the *Metonym Journal*.

Gina Bernard
Gina Marie Bernard is a heavily tattooed transgender woman, roller derby vixen, and full-time English teacher. She has completed a 50-mile ultra marathon, followed Joan Jett across the US, taught creative writing at a medium-security prison, and purposely jumped through a hole cut in lake ice. She lives in Bemidji, Minnesota. Her daughters, Maddie and Parker, own her heart. She has written one YA novel, Alpha Summer (2005), and one collection of short fiction, Vent (2013). Her work has recently appeared in *r.kv.r.y. quarterly, Flypaper Magazine*, and *The Hunger Journal*. She has creative nonfiction forthcoming in *Waccamaw Journal* and *Jet Fuel Review*; and poetry forthcoming in *Coffin Bell Journal, Rat's Ass Review*, and *Lavender Review*.

Ace Boggess
Ace Boggess is author of three books of poetry, most recently *Ultra Deep Field* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2017), and the novel *A Song Without a Melody* (Hyperborea Publishing, 2016). His fourth poetry collection, *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So*, is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press. His writing has appeared in *Anomaly Literary Journal, Harvard Review, Mid-American Review, RATTLE, River Styx, North Dakota Quarterly* and many other journals. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

Christos Kalli
Christos Kalli, born in Larnaca, Cyprus, is currently studying for his undergraduate degree in English Literature at the University of Glasgow. He has been recently accepted by the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford for a postgraduate degree. His poetry has been translated into French and shortlisted for the Jane Martin Poetry Prize, and his chapbook *INT. NIGHT* was a finalist for the Sutra Press Chapbook Contest. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from the *American Journal of Poetry*, the *Adroit Journal*, the *Los Angeles Review*, the *minnesota review*, *PANK*, *The Hollins Critic*, and *Dunes Review*, among others. He is a Poetry Reader at/for the *Adroit Journal* and a current nominee for *Best New Poets* (2018). Visit him at christoskalli.com

Samn Stockwell
Samn Stockwell has been widely published, and her two books, Theater of Animals and Recital, won the National Poetry Series and the Editor's Prize at *Elixir*, respectively. Recent work has appeared in *Poet Lore, Salamander* and *Spillway*. She has an M.F.A. from Warren Wilson College.

Christopher Locke
Christopher Locke's poems have appeared in such magazines as The *North American Review*, *Agenda*, *Poetry East*, *Verse Daily*, *Southwest Review*, The *Literary Review*, The *Sun*, *West Branch*, *Rattle*, The *Stinging Fly*, *Tears in the Fence*, and NPR's *Morning Edition* and Ireland's *Radio One*. Locke has seven collections of poetry published. His most recent is *Ordinary Gods* (2017—Salmon Poetry). Locke has received the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Award, state grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, and a fellowship from Fundacion Valparaiso, (Spain). He teaches poetry at The Poetry Barn online and North Country Community College, New York, in person.

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Bruce McRae
Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician currently residing on Salt Spring Island BC, is a Pushcart nominee and a widely published poet with work appearing in magazines such as *Poetry, Rattle* and the *North American Review*. His books are *The So-Called Sonnets* (Silenced Press), *An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy* (Cawing Crow Press) and *Like As If* (Pskis Porch), all available via Amazon.

Sandy Coomer
Sandy Coomer is a poet, artist, and endurance athlete living in Brentwood, TN. Twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize, her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in journals such as *Sheila Na Gig, Mud Season Review, BlazeVOX, The Hunger* and *Sky Island Journal*. She is the author of three poetry chapbooks, including the most recent, *Rivers Within Us* (Unsolicited Press). She is the founding editor of the online poetry journal, *Rockvale Review*, the creator and curator of the *Ekphrastic poetry project 20/20 Vision: A Poetic Response to Photography*, as well as a poetry mentor in the AWP Writer to Writer Mentorship Program. Her favorite word is "Believe."

Evan Caris
E. M. Caris is a writer and researcher for Cracked, and in his free time he writes fiction. His short story 'How to Make a Ghost' in this issue of *Anomaly Literary Journal* is his first published piece.

Nathan Ferguson
Formerly, Nathan Ferguson was a newspaper reporter and an editor as well as a freelance writer for various magazines and websites. One of his short stories appeared in *Pooled Ink*, a literary anthology published by Northern Colorado Writers (NCW). He has recently completed his first novel.

Jeff Ewing
Jeff Ewing is a writer from Northern California. His stories, poems, and essays have appeared in *ZYZZYVA*, *Willow Springs, Sugar House Review, Crazyhorse, Saint Ann's Review, Lake Effect, Clockhouse*, and *Dunes Review*, among others. He has recently been awarded second place in the *Atticus Review Flash Fiction Contest* for my story '*Lake Mary Jane*', which has subsequently been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He lives in Sacramento, California with his wife and daughter.

Josiah Berger
Josiah Berger is a senior at the University of New Orleans, and he is currently in the process of applying to different Fiction MFA programs. His short story, *Life in Big Circle,* featured in this issue of *Anomaly Literary Journal* is his first publication.

Jodi Andrews
Jodi Andrews recently had her chapbook *The Shadow of Death* accepted for publication by Finishing Line Press. She lives in South Dakota with her husband and teaches English at South Dakota State University. She has had work published in *Anomaly Literary Journal, Dark Matter Journal, Pasque Petals, The Remembered Arts Journal*, and others.

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Acknowledgements: Artwork

Seung-Hwan Oh
Seung-Hwan Oh, a.k.a., Tonio Oh, works and liveS in Seoul, where he was born and raised until moving to New York where he studied film and photography at Hunter College. His work and practice stem from his interest and approach towards other disciplinary thoughts and ideas, from philosophy to sciences. His most recent work, exhibited at Zaha Museum, was inspired by the notion of the first advent of vision in life on earth and his current work focuses on implementing microbial growth on film as a means to explore the impermanence of matter as well as the material limitations of photography. His work graces the cover of this issue and also on page 86 at the start of this Acknowledgements section.

Joseph Zbukvic
Joseph Zbukvic is a leading master of watercolour medium of his time. His impressive achievements and enormous success is due to his ability to transform any subject into visual poetic language. Covering an infinite variety of subjects, his sensitive, lyrical and atmospheric paintings have captured people and galleries from all around the world. You can visit him at www.josephzbukvic.comJoseph's work can be found on page 2 & 6.

David Antonides
Born in Whitehorse, Yukon in 1958, David Antonides has studied in Vancouver, Europe and New York. His work is focused on watercolour - but in an approach that creates a weight and drama not normally associated with this typically transparent and fragile medium. David paints primarily in Berlin, Vancouver and New York. His work is included in corporate and private collections in Canada, USA, Europe and Asia. David has been influenced by Asian calligraphic and compositional work, Riopelle, Richter, de Kooning, Kline, Chu TehChun, Luc Tuymens and years rendering figure in watercolour. You find out more about David's work at his website: www.davidantonides.comDavid's work can be found on pages 10 & 14.

Michael Creese
Michael Creese was born in Chicago, Illinois, and studied art at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pennsylvania, where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. Michael paints in the oil impasto style, a technique used in art where paint is laid thickly on canvas, leaving visible brush (or palette knife) strokes. When dry, impasto provides a great deal of texture to the finished painting. He also works with several other mediums in addition to oils, most notably watercolors. Only high quality artist's materials, permanent lightfast pigments, archival canvas mounted on solid wood stretcher bars, and acid-free watercolor papers are used in the creation of his work. Michael is currently a member of the National Oil and Acrylic Painters' Society. His work can be found on pages 18, 28, 42, 48, 56, 70, 82.

Ruslan Fedasyuk

Ruslan enjoys taking photographs where-ever and of whoever he can. Ruslan lives with his wife in Stockholm. You can find his portfolio here: https://ruslanfedasyuk.myportfolio.com/
Ruslan's work can be found on pages 22 & 52.

Richard Vyse
Internationally collected artist Richard Vyse has been featured in galleries in New York and Hawaii . He has studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York and Massachusetts College of Art in Boston going

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on to inspire students at Pratt Institute said in Brooklyn. His art has been featured in the Art of Man issue #19, Agave magazine Spring 2015, Gravel magazine August 2015, Driftwood Press Literary magazine volume 2 issue 4 and Noisy Rain magazine Winter 2015. His art is in the Leslie+Lohman museum in New York City. His work in this issue can be found on page 26.

Jim Zola

Jim Zola has worked in a warehouse, as a security guard, in a bookstore, as a teacher for Deaf children, as a toy designer for Fisher Price, and currently as a children's librarian. Published in many journals through the years, his publications include a chapbook, *The One Hundred Bones of Weather* (Blue Pitcher Press) and a full length poetry collection, *What Glorious Possibilities* (Aldrich Press). He currently lives in Greensboro, NC. Jim Zola's artwork can be found on the back cover of this issue.

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